

# **London Clerical Workers 1880-1914: The Search For Stability**

**By**

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**Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History in July 2003**



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## **Abstract of Research**

The thesis is a study of male clerical workers in London between 1880 and 1914. It aims to examine the working conditions and experiences of clerks and to analyse organisational structures in the context of the changes that were taking place in the wider London office economy. Chief amongst these alterations was a growth in clerical numbers, an increase in the size of many offices, a more rational approach to office work with increased division of labour, and application of office machinery to clerical work, the rise of formal commercial education, and the introduction of women in large numbers into the office. Its chief aim is to measure the impact of these changes on clerical workers.

Existing historiography has in the main argued that the effects of these changes were on the whole negative. This thesis argues that in the context of London these claims are unfounded. Incomes are shown to have increased rather than deteriorated. There is little sign of unemployment, lack of promotional opportunities, deskilling or a fundamental sense of disquiet amongst clerks. Female clerks and technology did not have a negative effect on male clerical workers. Indeed, the opposite appears to be the case. Rationalisation and an increased application of division of labour often led to specialisation. Technology often relieved clerks of performing repetitive and unskilled work and allowed them to concentrate on other, more demanding and rewarding areas. Women were chiefly employed in the lower tier of clerical work, and the near universal application of the marriage bar, which obliged female clerks to resign on marriage, meant that they posed no real competition to the future prospects of clerical worker. Although growth in companies did lead to more impersonal working



relations, the introduction of company welfare such as pensions and paid holidays, and the establishment of sport and social clubs and staff magazines in many organisations did much to compensate for this.

Overall, clerical work in London remained popular throughout the period and attracted recruits due to the economic stability it offered and the opportunities it gave for advancement.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my research supervisors Professor David French and Professor Catherine Hall for the invaluable help, advice and support that they have given me whilst carrying out this research.

In relation to the actual research, I would like to thank all the archivists, librarians and organisations that have assisted me and allowed me to look at their material. In relation to the latter, I would particularly like to thank the Royal Bank of Scotland Group and the Prudential, and their archivists Philip Winterbottom, Clare Bunkham and David Carter. I would also like to thank the staff at the British Library, the National Archives, the London Metropolitan Archives, the Essex Records Office and the staff of the local history libraries in the London Boroughs of Hackney, Southwark and Redbridge. I would also particularly thank Jim Hancock whose sharing of his and his father's memories of office work at the Westminster and later National Westminster Bank have been of invaluable help to this study.

I would also like to thank my family and friends for their help and support which has been essential. In particular I would like to thank Kaoruko Kondo, Adrian Casillias, Martin Percy, Rico Dent, and Stephie Courlet. Their often long conversations with me on the subject of my thesis and help they furnished were of great assistance.

## Introduction

This thesis is a study of male clerical workers in London between 1880 and 1914. It is an examination of the working lives of these men and the environments in which they worked. It aims to question the dominant argument in current historiography that these workers, throughout this period, were in crisis in terms of income, job stability and promotion. It also aims to historically examine the lives of a key group of London workers who have so far escaped the notice of historians. In relation to clerks, it seeks to examine a number of areas including the work these men were doing, the expectations they had towards this, and the impact of changes in their professional lives such as the rapid growth in the use of female clerks and the growing application of technology. It also aims to analyse the late Victorian and Edwardian office. Relations between employers and employees, amongst the staff as a whole and between the institution and individual will be important areas of discussion. In addition, the impact of the growth of some modern bureaucracies will be examined. These were new to this era, and the strategies, ideologies and routines which were established set important precedents for the future.

Key to this study is the argument that office work in London and throughout the nation witnessed important structural changes in the period of this study. Chief amongst these was the growth in clerical workers. R. Guerriero Wilson, for example, has estimated that the number of 'commercial clerks' (of both sexes) increased in England and Wales between 1881 and 1911 from 181,457 to 477,535 and in Scotland from 26,659 to 69,404.<sup>1</sup> The number of male commercial clerks residing in London rose from 58,278 in 1881 to 82,027 in 1911. If one adds civil servants, bank,

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<sup>1</sup> R. Guerriero Wilson, Disillusionment or New Opportunities? The Changing Nature of Work in Offices, Glasgow 1880-1914, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p. 37.

insurance and railway clerks this figure increased from 80,109 to 126,395. The rise is even more impressive for women, from 2,327 female commercial clerks living in London in 1881 to 32,893 in 1911. If one adds the other groups the figure rose from 3,101 to 39,943.<sup>2</sup> Alongside this increase in number were other changes; a growth in the scale of operations and the employment of women and technology have been mentioned, a greater division of labour, an increased emphasis on formal qualifications and training, and the gradual replacement of patronage by merit can be highlighted as other developments. The central topic of this study is the impact of these changes on London's male clerical workers.

### **Literature Review of British Clerical Workers c. 1870 – 1914**

Central to any discussion of the historical literature on the working lives of clerical workers in the late-Victorian and Edwardian period is the fact that it is pre-dated by a large corpus of social research. Before historians became interested in clerical workers there was an established academic vocabulary and field of reference which was broadly accepted by these writers. Research and debate by historians on the topic has consequently been to a large degree an extension of a prior sociological debate. Any review of the historical literature would therefore be incomplete without an examination of this social commentary.

The first individual to produce a comprehensive survey of clerical workers in Britain was B.G. Orchard, a clerk from Liverpool and former head of the Liverpool Clerks'

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<sup>2</sup> Census of England and Wales 1881-1911, (London, Her/His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1881-1911).

Provident and Annuity Association. Orchard's work, The Clerks of Liverpool, published in 1871, provided an in-depth contemporary study of Liverpool's office workers.<sup>3</sup> It presented information on the number of clerks working in the city, their social background, education, work opportunities, incomes, apprenticeships, employment agencies and associations, and their complaints. Orchard's chief aim was to refute those commentators who claimed that the clerical profession in Liverpool was in crisis. The study was filled with statistics and quotes from newspaper articles, individual clerks and employers and tried its utmost to provide objective information.

Orchard's work was the first systematic study of clerks in Britain, and acted as a template for later research. Many of the areas he examined were addressed by future historians and social commentators. In addition, much of the evidence he produced was used by these authors, sometimes to demonstrate decline in direct opposition to his original purpose.

In the 1930s an important book on clerical workers was published by the Marxist sociologist F.D. Klingender, The Condition of Clerical Labour in Britain. This argued that since the 1870s clerks, middle-class in origin, had undergone a process of downward mobility and by the mid-thirties had become working-class or 'proletarianised'.<sup>4</sup> Thus began the 'proletarian debate'. The debate was important to Marxists such as Klingender since it was seen as a major test of the accuracy of Marx's social prognostications and, with the rapid rise in clerical work, was regarded as highly relevant to British society.

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<sup>3</sup> B.G. Orchard, The Clerks of Liverpool, (Liverpool: J. Collinson, 1871).

<sup>4</sup> F.D. Klingender, The Condition of Clerical Labour in Britain, ( London: Martin Lawrence, 1935)

Marx had argued that with the development and expansion of capitalism, divisions between capitalists and the proletariat would become more marked and openly aggressive.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the working class, in part with the absorption of pre-industrial groups such as the peasantry, small farmers, the petit bourgeoisie and independent craftsmen, would expand, and, conversely, the bourgeoisie would contract. These developments would hasten the revolution which would usher in Marx's communist utopia. In such a social nexus the rapid expansion of clerical workers since the latter half of the nineteenth century clearly posed a dilemma. How could the bourgeoisie be withering away when one of their key components was expanding every year? The answer to this conundrum was that clerks and clerical labour, always a vulnerable group on the fringe of the bourgeoisie, were with time, incrementally, but systematically, becoming more and more proletarianised.

Klingender, often relying heavily on the literature of clerical unions, used several basic arguments to demonstrate the social decline of office workers. He argued that with the increase in the scale of production of offices, their rationalisation and the application of technology, clerical work had become deskilled. In relation to working conditions and remuneration, Klingender tried to show that vis-à-vis the working classes, clerks had suffered gradual, relative decline. Additionally, one of the chief benefits of clerical work, its stability, had in his opinion become a myth. Clerks, like the rest of the working classes, had become vulnerable to unemployment. For Klingender, the clear sign of the 'proletarianisation' of clerical workers was their increasing attraction to trade unionism, a sure indication of their rejection of

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on Marx's writings on clerks see *Ibid.*, pp. 105-7.

bourgeois values. It was this and the experience of the Slump and prolonged depression of the thirties which convinced him of the social demise of clerks.

A riposte to Klingender's argument came after the Second World War from the sociologist David Lockwood's, The Blackcoated Worker: A Study in Class Consciousness.<sup>6</sup> Reminiscent of Orchard's earlier work, Lockwood argued for the distinct status of clerical workers, and their superiority to skilled workers, and against any sign of social deterioration. Using a Weberian social critique based on notions of class, status and party, Lockwood argued that in terms of *market situation* – i.e. wages, job security and promotion prospects, *work situation* – i.e. social relations between employers and managers and more junior staff, and *status situation* – i.e. the degree of prestige enjoyed by groups of workers in society, white collar workers enjoyed distinct advantages over blue collar workers. Clerks earned more, had greater security, received more perks such as company pension plans, had greater opportunities for promotion, enjoyed better relations with senior management, worked in smaller groups with more autonomy and received greater social respect. There was, hence, no evidence of proletarianisation.

In addition to his research on clerical workers in the 1950's, in his opening chapter Lockwood wrote a brief historical account of clerical workers in the Victorian and Edwardian periods. He argued that many of the advantages that he had enumerated for blackcoated workers in the 1950s had been present half a century earlier. Clerks were more educated than blue-collar workers, they usually came from higher social backgrounds, their work was clean and involved the exercise of brain and not brawn.

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<sup>6</sup> D. Lockwood, The Blackcoated Worker: A Study in Class Consciousness, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1958)

Their dress distinguished them from the mass of ordinary workers, they worked more closely with their superiors, enjoyed better chances of promotion and security, and were entrusted with more confidential work. As Lockwood noted, ‘...If economically they were sometimes on the margin, socially they were definitely part of the middle class. They were so regarded by the outside world, and they regarded themselves as such’.<sup>7</sup>

Klingender and Lockwood established the parameters for the academic discourse on clerical workers from the nineteenth century to the present. It was one which was primarily concerned with class, and which gravitated around the question of social decline. Were clerical workers on a downward social path, as a result of the onslaught of capital accumulation, rationalisation, feminisation and technology, or were they able to maintain barriers between themselves and the working classes beneath them? It was, and remains, a hotly contested debate as for many what was and is at stake is the nature of class society and its implications.<sup>8</sup> The whole debate was revitalised in particular by the publication of Harry Braverman’s, Labor and Monopoly Capitalism, which, while essentially repeating Klingender’s arguments in the context of the United States, was greeted with broad acclaim and met with wide interest.<sup>9</sup>

Given the academic weight of such a debate it is hardly surprising that when historians finally began to look at clerical workers in the 1970’s many of the above

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> See J.H. Goldthorpe, D. Lockwood, F. Bechhofer, and J. Platt, The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), A. Stewart, K. Prandy, and R.M. Blackburn, Social Stratification and Occupations, (London: Macmillan, 1980), R. Crompton and G. Jones, White-Collar Proletariat. Deskillling and Gender in Clerical Work, (London: Macmillan, 1984), G. Marshall, H. Newby, D. Rose and C. Volger, Social Class in Modern Britain, (London: Hutchinson, 1988). See also H. Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capitalism, (New York: Monthly Review, 1974).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



issues were incorporated into their studies. The first such work was Gregory Anderson's, Victorian Clerks, a study of clerical workers in Liverpool and Manchester from the 1870s to 1914.<sup>10</sup> Anderson relied heavily on previous studies, and in relation to theory and to some extent content, his book was to some extent a more modern rendition of Klingender. Anderson argued that clerks had earlier in the nineteenth century been an exclusive group, rewarded socially and financially for their command of the relatively scarce skills of literacy and numeracy. With the onset of a more intense stage of capitalism in the 1870s, however, clerical workers began to lose this privileged status. The rapid growth in the numbers of clerks, the use of youths and women, the Great Depression of the late 1870s, the growth and rationalisation of work, the establishment of universal education, and the application of technology all contributed to this. Clerks' attempts to stave off their fall via associations and commercial education were dismissed as useless. By 1914, with a decline in income due to an over-supply in the clerical market, increased unemployment and deskilling, the difference between clerks and the working classes, particularly artisans, had been greatly narrowed.

No other major historical research devoted exclusively to clerical workers appeared until 1998 with the publication of R. Guerriero Wilson's, Disillusionment or New Opportunities? The Changing Nature of Work in Offices, Glasgow 1880-1914.<sup>11</sup> Wilson's work is effectively a transfer of Anderson's Victorian and Edwardian Liverpoolian and Mancunian clerical workers to Glasgow. Apart from some work on the changing nature of accountancy, the effect of increased Governmental regulation

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<sup>10</sup> Gregory Anderson, Victorian Clerks, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976).

<sup>11</sup> R. Guerriero Wilson, Disillusionment or New Opportunities? The Changing Nature of Work in Offices, Glasgow 1880-1914. (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1998)

of clerical work, and the struggle between businessmen and educationalists over the direction of commercial education in Scotland, there is little to distinguish Wilson's basic argument from Anderson's. The story is the usual one of decline and fall. The usual suspects of bureaucratisation, office machinery, female clerks, falling incomes, unstable positions, and failed dreams of promotion all make their appearances. Invidious comparison between clerks and artisans is the warp and weft of its entire analysis. There is also a serious absence of reference to previous research on clerical workers, particularly in relation to the feminisation of office work.

The entry of women in office work from the 1880s has attracted historical interest, especially from those interested in gender related issues. One of the first books to address the issue was Lee Holcombe's, Victorian Ladies at Work.<sup>12</sup> Holcombe devoted two chapters of her book to female clerks in commercial offices and the civil service. She concentrated on the work which women carried out in offices, their working conditions, opportunities, and the salaries they received. The close connection between the feminisation and mechanisation of the office was highlighted, with the majority of women becoming typists. Holcombe also drew attention to the growth of commercial education which prepared many female clerks for office work and argued that, partly as a result of this, many of the first female clerks came from the middle classes. Female clerks' grievances, particularly their low pay and excessive hours were also discussed. Gregory Anderson's edited collection of essays on women clerks, The White-Blouse Revolution, expanded on many of the themes Holcombe had covered.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lee Holcombe, Victorian Ladies at Work Middle Class Working Women in England and Wales 1850-1914, (Newton Abbott: David & Charles, 1973)

<sup>13</sup> Gregory Anderson (ed.), The White-Blouse Revolution, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988)

Work on the feminisation of the office has been developed to a much greater extent by the American social scientist Samuel Cohn in his work, The Process of Occupational Sex-Typing.<sup>14</sup> The study is a detailed historical analysis of the feminisation of office work in two British businesses, the Great Western Railway and the Post Office, between 1870 and 1939. As the title suggests, Cohn was primarily interested in occupational sex-typing, the process by which work becomes gendered. As Cohn argued, clerical work is an excellent area to study as it is a good example of a profession which switched its sex-type from predominantly male in the nineteenth century to female in the twentieth.

Cohn applied dual labour-theory to clerical work, the idea that within work there are usually two cadres of employees. On the one hand there is normally a smaller group of individuals carrying out more skilled and well paid work with firm chances of promotion, while on the other, there exists a larger group of workers performing mechanical and low paid work with few chances of mobility. Cohn argued that a gendered dual-labour market became established in the two companies he examined. Men moved into more skilled and better remunerated positions, while women were relegated to low paid, and on the whole, relatively unskilled clerical positions. This thesis was investigated by Ellen Jordan in relation to the Prudential Life Assurance Company in London between 1870 and 1914, and was broadly corroborated.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Samuel Cohn, The Process of Occupational Sex-Typing The Feminization of Clerical Labor in Great Britain, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985)

<sup>15</sup> Ellen Jordan, 'The Lady Clerks at the Prudential: The Beginning of Vertical Segregation by Sex in Clerical Work in Nineteenth-Century Britain', Gender and History, Vol. 8 No. 1 April 1996, pp. 65-81.

While Cohn's research was concerned primarily with the feminisation of clerical work, it also produced important findings which directly contradict the pessimistic research of Anderson and Wilson. Cohn's work suggested that male clerks' positions actually improved as a result of employing women. Promotion for male clerks was regular and incomes were increasing, not going down as has been almost universally accepted. In addition, in relation to the application of office machinery, Cohn argued that there was no overall deskilling affect. Whereas some items such as adding machines and filing systems may have replaced older skills, others, such as typewriters introduced new ones. In addition, much of the new machinery performed mechanical, routine work, thus leaving clerks free to concentrate on more demanding tasks.<sup>16</sup>

Cohn's work is important in the historiography of clerical workers as it shows that there are alternative accounts to those which support the proletarianisation thesis argued by writers such as Anderson and Wilson. Such work is more akin to the work carried out by Lockwood. Such a positive view is also supported by historians who have concentrated on individual organisations and have paid attention to clerical workers in this period in such concerns as the Home Office, the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank and the London County Council.<sup>17</sup> In these important case studies there is no evidence, either in terms of income, promotional aspects, feminisation, or the introduction of technology that male clerks were suffering or were undergoing any form of proletarianisation. In many respects the opposite was indeed the case.

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<sup>16</sup> Cohn., Chapter 3.

<sup>17</sup> See Susan Pennybacker, A Vision for London 1889-1914: Labour Everyday Life and the L.C.C. Experiment, (London: Routledge, 1995), Jill Pellew, The Home Office 1848-1914 From Clerks to Bureaucrats, (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1982) and David King, The History of the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Volumes I and II, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987)

The most complete rejection of Anderson *et al's* account of decline is an article written by Paul Attewell, 'The Clerk Deskilled: A Study in False Nostalgia'.<sup>18</sup> Attewell's article challenged the theory of the deskilling and degradation of clerical work in the latter half of the nineteenth century on several major levels. His most important argument was that theories of decline advocated by Braverman and other writers have blurred the distinction between the clerks in crisis in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the more prestigious, exclusive clerks of an earlier period. For Attewell much of what has been written on these earlier clerks was pure nostalgia, based on the experience of an atypical group of more affluent clerks. Citing comments on pre-1880s clerks, Attewell argued that much of clerical work was always routine, repetitious and deadening. In addition, he argued that divisions of labour within the office and rationalisation took place much earlier. In this sense, Attewell threw into question the whole bifurcated genealogy of clerks which was so central to the doctrine of the proletarianisation of office work.

Attewell's and Cohn's work is important. Just as in the case of debates amongst sociologists concerning clerks and office work, there exist strong grounds for rejecting the claims of those who argue for the proletarianisation of clerical workers towards the end of the nineteenth century. But as yet, no full-scale study has been carried out to demonstrate this. There is thus a solid case for research which could test and further investigate these contentions.

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Attewell, 'The Clerk Deskilled: A Study in False Nostalgia', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol. 2, No. 4 December 1989, 357-387.

In addition, while the debate on class and the nature of office work in a modern capitalist society inherited from the sociological discourse is clearly relevant, there is an equally valid historical need to investigate what was taking place in offices. In terms of research, there has been too much dependence on newspaper articles, the magazines of clerical unions and associations (which tend to produce one sided views), and an entire literature of complaint, rather than a comprehensive analysis of actual offices and the experiences of clerks. By the use of detailed investigation on London offices and by using oral evidence and diaries this thesis hopes to redress this balance. Finally, there has been a too ready acceptance of these complaints and a lack of healthy, genuine scepticism. There is a need to cross-examine these sources in order to gain a better insight into the actual conditions of office life in the years running up to the First World War.

### **Key Questions of the Thesis**

This thesis agrees with the literature reviewed that important structural economic and social shifts took place which altered the nature of office work. Capital accumulation, technological innovation, and feminisation all had fundamental implications for clerks and their working environment. Related to these were important developments in London's economy. The integration of the domestic and international markets via changes in transport, communication and distribution, and the emergence of London as an international centre which played a leading role in orchestrating an emerging global economy transformed the capital. As a consequence, clerical work rapidly expanded in London. Side by side with this growth, some organisations such as the railways, banks, insurance houses, and national and local government quickly expanded, and office work became more methodical, impersonal and bureaucratic.

Where this study differs from much of the existing literature is in its approach to the implications of these changes. The principle question of this study is whether the overall effects were as traumatic as has been portrayed in much of the literature, or rather are writers such as Cohn and Attewell more accurate in taking a less jaundiced view? In this respect, the study is 'traditional' in that it examines areas such as income, work relations, technology, feminisation, education, and trade unionism and organisation which have been examined before. It is different, however, in that it does not accept the grand narrative of writers such as Klingender, Braverman and Anderson that these changes invariably had such inauspicious results for clerical workers.

Related to this, is the question of how both employers and employees, companies and clerks, reacted to these changes. What strategies were devised by the former, for example, to maintain harmony in their organisations, to integrate clerks into the office, and to ensure that work was smoothly carried out? In relation to the latter, what approaches were developed to negotiate this new working environment? How did clerks' attitudes change towards work and how in turn did this affect these workers both socially and individually? Important contributions # are made here by this study in relation to the growing importance of sport and social activities in work, the role of commercial education and the professionalisation and growing career opportunities for clerical workers.

One final important question for this research is what did these changes mean for clerical work in London? Throughout the period of this study London was the biggest city in the world and clerical workers were its largest male occupational group. Yet

there has been no study of London clerks, despite similar studies having been done for Liverpool, Manchester and Glasgow. A large part of this research has consequently been historical mapping, particularly in sectors such as banking, the railways and local and national government. In addition, how London's education system changed to deal with the growth in office work is examined.

## **Outline of the Chapters**

The study is divided into eight chapters. They are as follows:

### ***Chapter One***

An introductory chapter. A definition of 'clerk' is given for this period, based on the contemporary usage of the term. The chapter examines how changes in London's economy had radical implications for clerks, especially in terms of the clerical labour market. In addition, it reveals how businesses and government offices altered in relation to these changes. The emergence of the specialised office worker is documented.

### ***Chapter Two***

An examination of working conditions. Trends in clerical salaries in London throughout the period, job security and promotion are all investigated. The principal aim of the chapter is to refute Anderson's claim, and that of other pessimists, that conditions were worsening, and to show that they were improving.



### ***Chapter Three***

This chapter shows how the working environment radically changed for clerical workers . It is divided into two parts. Firstly, it examines how relations changed between the clerk and his employer. It argues that this relationship evolved from a master/servant affair based on patronage and dependence to an employer/employee arrangement based on efficiency, company loyalty and income. In the second part working practices are examined. It is argued that the period witnessed the establishment of more tightly defined divisions of labour in the office which encouraged the development of specialisation. Such changes should not, however, be seen as an unfavourable development. For many, there is evidence that clerks during their career passed through a number of positions, thus developing their professional skills. The implications of the introduction of sport and social clubs into the workplace and the actual working regime in the office are also considered.

### ***Chapter Four***

The attitude of the clerk towards work is discussed. In addition to the security which office work provided and the income it secured, the clerical worker invested his work with other positive characteristics. These were the non-manual character of clerical work, professionalism, service, character, the pride of working in London and promotion. Some of these factors evolved from an earlier period, some were new. All were associated with the new working environment discussed in the previous chapter. The issues of job satisfaction and occupational masculinity will also be considered.

## ***Chapter Five***

The mechanisation and feminisation of the office is examined. This is an area which has received relatively wide coverage. Much of the chapter is consequently a re-examination of the question based on a review of existing work and new material. Did the introduction of new technology into the office and the advent of female clerks pose the threat to male clerks that has been posited, or was it really an opportunity for these workers? The chapter argues that the extent of the danger that these posed to men has been exaggerated. Technology removed repetitive work, and women were often used to operate this technology. Freed from these tasks, male clerk were given greater chances to carry out more diverse and well paid work.

## ***Chapter Six***

This chapter has two related themes. The first is the effects of the expansion of education on the clerical worker. The second is the change in recruitment for office work in this period. A traditional argument is that the expansion of education had a negative impact on clerical workers by diluting their relatively scarce literary and numerical skills and opening their work up to a much wider pool of people. This chapter argues that there is a more complex picture. While elementary education expanded, so did secondary education. Since secondary education was an increasing requirement for clerical work, the effects of the spread of elementary education were

mitigated. In the second part recruitment is considered. The introduction of formal qualifications and their effects on clerical recruitment are investigated. In addition, the continued existence of formal ties and patronage are discussed. An important argument here is that recruitment into London's clerical market was highly regulated. It is this which partially accounts for the lack of any collapse in clerical incomes.

### ***Chapter Seven***

This chapter discusses commercial education and the clerk. The period witnessed a massive expansion of its provision in the capital. The extension of commercial education, the institutions where it was provided and its impact on clerical work is examined. In particular, the Polytechnics, the evening schools, the London School of Economics and Pitmans Metropolitan School are discussed. The examination of the effects of commercial education on clerical work takes place within the context of the introduction of new technologies and techniques into the office, the breakdown of more traditional training techniques and the growing professionalism of the work itself. Finally, the attitude of clerks to commercial education is considered. Within the framework of the overall argument of the research, it is suggested that the growth of commercial education had a considerable impact on clerical work and should be examined from the perspective of the structural shifts that were taking place within office work.

### ***Chapter Eight***

The final chapter examines clerical trade unions and professional organisations. The chapter questions to what degree traditional definitions of trade unions are adequate to describe clerical organisations? Organisations such as the Civil Service Assistant Clerks Association, for example, were not officially trade unions but certainly acted like these groups. The aims of clerical unions and professional organisations, the strategies they deployed to achieve their goals, the relationship between the clerical worker and collective action, and the reasons for the limited and uneven appeal of unionisation for clerks are all discussed. One principal argument of the chapter is that the traditional belief that the supposed individualism of the clerk precluded collective action should be dismissed. It was working conditions themselves that were the principal determinants of whether clerks organised themselves or not. The relative failure of clerical workers to organise is consequently a powerful argument against those who argue for a deterioration in office working conditions.

### **A Note on Sources**

The study has drawn on a wide range of sources. Its originality lies in the fact that not only has it looked at new material, but it has also used evidence not employed before by historians of clerks, namely diaries and oral histories. These sources were invaluable in that they gave access to individual experience. Oral history and diaries acted as a counter-weight to the rather didactic tones of more traditional sources such as trade union magazines and company reports which tended to follow certain agendas. While these sources do not offer a transparent view of the past, they do enable clerks to be looked at from different perspectives than has been previously possible.

The more traditional primary sources included company and governmental archives, journals and newspapers, governmental reports, contemporary material written on clerks and offices such as advice books, fiction, memoirs, and records of the National Union of Clerks. Some, such as the clerical journals, had been used before. Others, such as many company and government records had not been examined previously in relation to clerks. Material which had already been used by previous historians has been re-examined.

The focus of this study is male clerks in London. It does not purport to present what was happening nationally, nor does it do so in relation to female clerks, while not denying the historical legitimacy of either. Most of the sources are consequently metropolitan and male in scope. London was chosen because it contained the largest concentration of clerks in Britain. It is also where I am based. Men were chosen because much of the existing literature has personified them as victims which was something I wanted to question and re-examine. This does not mean that women are completely ignored. It does mean, however, that they receive attention only when the subject, such as technology or the feminisation of the office, touches on an aspect which affected male clerks.

In sum, the bulk of the material used is oral material from interviews with clerical workers, diaries, and materials traditionally used by historians of clerks such as company archives, journals and government reports.

Finally, in relation to material used from the Royal Bank of Scotland Archives, namely that relating to the London and County Bank, the London and Westminster Bank, and Glyn's Bank, the names of clerks have been made anonymous due to company policy which prevents the names of former employees from being used. Consequently, these will be referred to as 'Clerk A', 'Clerk B', etc. Eight clerks, 'A' to 'H' have been so named.

### **The Interviews and Diaries**

This material consisted of eleven interviews and five diaries. The interviews were with individuals who were either clerical workers for the period 1880-1918 or were children of such individuals, or were both, with some working as clerks after 1918. In total three were clerks, two were children of clerks and six were clerks and children of clerks. All except one individual lived and worked in London. The exception, Mr. Frederick Henry Taylor, was born in 1879 and lived and worked as a clerk in the potteries in Hanley in the North West.<sup>19</sup> He was chosen because of his educational background and because he worked in the manufacturing sector, a significant area of employment in London, but for which no oral/diary evidence was available. Eight of the interviewees were men and three were women.

Out of the interviews seven were from the Paul Thompson and Thea Vigne national series of interviews, Family Life and Work Experience before 1918. These were carried out in the early 1970s and concentrated on the home, community and work life of those interviewed. Three came from the Millennium Memory Bank, a series of

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<sup>19</sup> British Library, QD1/FLWE/183, Paul Thompson and Thea Vigne, Family Life and Work Experience before 1918, 'Mr. Frederick Henry Taylor'.

interviews carried out in the late nineties across Britain to celebrate the millennium. These interviews also concentrated on work, family and community experiences. I carried out the final interview in 2001 with Jim Hancock, a former bank manager at the National Westminster Bank.<sup>20</sup> The interview was concerned with Jim's father who began work at the London County and Westminster Bank in 1913 and remained there all his working life. A tape of this interview is included.

## **The Diarists**

### **George Rose<sup>21</sup>**

George Rose's diaries began in 1900 and ended in the 1950s and were highly detailed. Rose wrote about everything from his love of music and his pursuit of art to office politics and Regent Street Polytechnic. Rose was born in 1882 and grew up in the Essex Village of Chipping Ongar. His father was a tailor and the diaries open with him working in his father's shop and doing some clerical work in the village. In 1901 he began working as a clerk for the Commercial Gas Company in Stepney, East London, where he was still working in 1914. In 1904 he moved to London and lived in a series of boarding houses in Kilburn and South Hampstead. In addition to working as a clerk, Rose was an accomplished amateur artist.

### **Daniel McEwen<sup>22</sup>**

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Jim Hancock at his home, November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Essex Records Office, D/DU418/1, 'The Diaries of George Rose, 1900-14'.

<sup>22</sup> London Borough of Southwark Archives, MS-1982/117, 'The Diary of Daniel McEwen, 1887-1910'.

Daniel McEwen was a clerk in the Office of the Official Receivers in Bankruptcy attached to the High Court. His diary begins in 1887, the year of his marriage to Ellen, when he was forty, and ends in 1910. The diary increasingly focused on McEwen's accounts and much of its information is cursory. McEwen never had any children, worked in the same office throughout the diary and recorded living in Camberwell at four different addresses. He was heavily involved in the co-operative movement, especially housing, and wrote and lectured on several topics including bankruptcy and social issues.

### **Andrew Carlyle Tait<sup>23</sup>**

Andrew Tait lived in Ilford and worked as a clerk in the City from the age of fifteen in James, Spicer and Sons, wholesale and export stationers. His father owned a bookshop in the City. Tait was born in 1878. The diary itself covered 1893-4 and dealt predominantly with his move to Ilford, his early life there, his education at Tyne Hall School in Ilford and his first few months working as a clerk in Spicers. Though short, it gives an excellent insight into the education he received, his interview at Spicers and work as a junior clerk in the City.

### **William Burgess Evans<sup>24</sup>**

William Evans was born in 1867 and was the eldest son of Francis Evans, a carpenter. He lived with his family in Hackney. Evans worked as a Solicitor's Clerk in the City at Messers Ashurst Morris Crisp and Co. His diaries deal with the period 1881-84 (his

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<sup>23</sup> London Guildhall Archives, MS-20382, 'The Diary of Andrew Carlyle Tait, 1893-94'.

<sup>24</sup> London Borough of Hackney Archives Department, DS/EVA/1-3, 'The Diaries of William Evans, 1881-84, 1889-1900'.



school and early working years) and 1889-1900. Evans was a devout Christian and much of the content of his writings deals with his religious life, particularly his activities at Clapton Park Congregational Church. They also deal with him meeting his wife and the early years of his marriage. The diaries do, however, cover his professional life and are illuminating in that they deal with the working environment of a small office.

### **Sydney Moseley<sup>25</sup>**

Sydney Moseley was born in 1888 and worked as a clerk at Waterlow & Sons, Accountants in the City between 1902 and 1909. He lived in Hackney, originally with his family and later on his own. On leaving Waterlow's Moseley worked for a short while as a salesman and then as a journalist, a career he followed for the rest of his working life. His diaries are different from the others in that they were published. Editing must therefore be taken into account. Nevertheless they provide important information on Moseley's working life, particularly his relationship with his colleagues and immediate superiors and his ceaseless attempts to gain promotion and at self-improvement. Like the other diaries, important information is also furnished on his family and social life.

### **A Note on Theory and Class**

While the study is not explicitly theoretical, theory does play a part in informing the reading of the sources and in providing coherence for the overall structure of the

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<sup>25</sup> Sydney Moseley, The Private Diaries of Sydney Moseley, (London: Max Parish, 1960)

thesis. The two main theories which are used are discourse analysis and the social stratification theory of Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu. Each of these will be briefly discussed.

Discourse analysis is the idea that social action is primarily determined by prior ideological structures which express themselves in and determine language, thought, belief, social interaction, identity, knowledge and practice.<sup>26</sup> These structures for all intents and purposes determine reality as it is perceived by historical agents. Put in another way, social and economic factors do not ultimately produce what is perceived, or the cognitive structures which enable us to do so, but rather it is those very structures which perceive, organise, categorise, signify and make sense of our social/economic environment and give it a sense of historical relevance.

Key to discourse analysis is the belief that individuals are only able to make sense of this reality through ideologically constructed filters. Since these filters or cognitive structures are historically constructed and change in relation to time and space the historian is able to analyse these and establish to some extent the basis of cognitive significance and thus understand and explain social action.

Important work has been carried out on discourse analysis by the French philosopher Michel Foucault.<sup>27</sup> One of Foucault's most important contributions was his analysis of the relationship between thought and institutions. Foucault, particularly in his work, The Archaeology of Knowledge, argued that many of our ideological structures

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and disciplines, especially in the modern period, are determined, produced and given  
For a discussion of discourse theory in history see Gareth Stedman Jones, 'The Determinist Fallacy: Some Obstacles to the Further Development of the Linguistic Approach to History in the 1990s', History Workshop Journal, 1996, Issue 42, 19- 35.

<sup>27</sup> For an overview of Foucault see Lois McNay, Foucault A Critical Introduction, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994)

disciplines, especially in the modern period, are determined, produced and given legitimacy by institutions such as universities, educational institutes, hospitals, prisons, clinics and governmental bodies.<sup>28</sup> In order to understand discourse one must therefore examine the relationship between thought and the institutional environment wherein that thought is generated and exercised, a nexus usually referred to as Knowledge/Power.

While discourse theory generally informs the whole study there is one area where it is prevalent. This is the argument that an important development in the later half of the nineteenth century that motivated and structured clerks' attitudes and approaches to work was the growth in the belief and support for merit and meritocratic values. Merit, the idea that an individual's social and economic position should reflect the extent of his ability, became an integral part of clerical workers' outlook and ideology and produced a number of discursive practices and strategies which are discussed in this study. This included a belief in self-improvement and individualism, a commitment to education and the development of the self. While changes in the work environment were bound to lead to re-alignments by clerks in relation to work, it was a discourse based on merit and ability which many clerical workers adopted with which to negotiate their changed working environment and which subsequently had important historical consequences.

In relation to social stratification this study is informed by the works of Max Weber and Pierre Bordieu. Weber's basic model for social difference was one based on his

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<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, (London: Tavistock, 1972)

three concepts of class, status and party.<sup>29</sup> These in turn reflected the economic, social and political factors which Weber saw as the bedrock of any given society. An individual's class position is essentially his market position. It referred to ownership and non-ownership, income, job security, promotion, in effect the life chances of an individual. Status, by comparison, is the social respect accorded to an individual due to his position in society. Due to the relative values of any given society some individuals, because of their respective functions, are given more social prestige than others. Finally individuals often belong to collective groups which are able to enhance their positions and give them more social leverage. By party Weber was not referring exclusively to a political entity but rather any collective body such as a union, a church or even an organisation such as the boy scouts which operated to enhance the collective interests of its members. While class, status and party often coincide, a lawyer, for example, has a high market position, enjoys a prestigious social status and will belong to a number of professional and civil associations, there are many situations where this is not the case. A clerk's status, due to the fact that he performed non-manual work, was in many respects higher than his class position. In addition, some clerks may have formed professional associations and trade unions in order to reinforce what were felt to be weak class and status positions in the period of this study.

Pierre Bordieu's work on social stratification, particularly his work, Distinction, drew on, developed and in many respects synthesised the ideas of Marx and Weber.<sup>30</sup> From the former, Bordieu derived the concept of capital, from the latter the above model of class, status and party. With the two Bordieu developed and established his key

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<sup>29</sup> See H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 180-195.

<sup>30</sup> Pierre Bordieu, Distinction A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, (London: Routledge, 1986)

concepts of economic, social, and cultural/intellectual capital. Any individual in society has a certain amount of these three capitals. It is their respective amounts and the relation between the three which determine social difference. One of Bordieu's most important contributions was that social groups often legitimate power derived from economic dominance by converting economic capital into cultural/intellectual capital. In this way they are able to reinforce their relative, hegemonic position in society and legitimise inequality. Key to this process is education. In addition, within this model, the focus of Bordieu changes from production, the traditional site of social stratification, to consumption. It is not simply what an individual produces that defines his relative social position, but equally important is what he consumes and how he does this.

The work and theory of Weber and Bordieu is highly apposite to this study of London clerks and enables it to produce an argument which is both original and distinctive from other works carried out on clerical workers in Britain. One of the basic contentions of this study is that London clerks between 1880 and 1914 belonged to a broad middle class and were able to reinforce their position within this group over this period. They did not suffer status anxiety nor entertain a false class consciousness. In terms of their market position, status and collective behaviour they were distinct from the broader working class. Their emphasis on education and cultural/intellectual capital and their consumption patterns were similarly singular, which in turn reinforced their social position. Most of these themes will be discussed in the following chapters.

Finally in relation to class, the contention that clerks were a part of the lower-middle class should be discussed.<sup>31</sup> While this study accepts this argument, it does so with two important caveats. The first is that the lower middle class should be seen as an important and growing sub-section of the middle class rather than a class in its own right. There were far more things which fundamentally united the middle classes – the fact that they did not perform manual work, their relative stable employment, their emphasis on education and cultural/intellectual capital, and their belief in individualism – than divided them. While what distinguished the lower-middle class from other middle-class groups was their relative paucity of economic and to some extent cultural capital, one must emphasise that being middle class was never simply about money.

In addition, it is crucial to stress that throughout the period of this study it is extremely difficult to say what ‘lower-middle class’ actually meant. The group was undergoing a process of evolution, it was literally coming into social existence. As a result the phrase was rarely used and when it was there was much confusion and a fundamental lack of agreement on what the term actually denoted. This ambiguity was clearly evidenced during the Macdonnell Commission, 1912-13, established by the government to examine recruitment, pay, working conditions and promotion in the Civil Service, in a dispute between Lord Macdonnell, the Chair, and Herbert H. Elvin, General Secretary of the National Union of Clerks. While for Macdonnell professions such as solicitors, physicians, veterinary surgeons and stockbrokers were broadly consumed in the lower-middle class, Elvin insisted that these came from a higher social stratum:

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<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of this topic see Geoffrey Crossick, ‘The Emergence of the Lower Middle Class in Britain’, in Geoffrey Crossick (ed.), The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870-1914, (London: Croom Helm, 1977).

(MacDonnell) The majority of them [a list of the professions he had just read out] are lower middle class if I may express myself so? – I should not look upon a lawyer as belonging to the lower middle class.

No. Not a solicitor? – Certainly I should not. I should not look upon a solicitor as belonging to the [lower] middle class.<sup>32</sup>

Due to the ambiguities and pejorative strains associated with it, most clerks preferred to simply call themselves middle class as did most social commentators.<sup>33</sup>

While the term ‘lower-middle class’ is relevant and was used to some extent, it should be handled with care by historians, with an appreciation that the meanings of words develop over time. The degree of clarity and popularity that the term has enjoyed since the Second World War in Britain and elsewhere did not exist in the decades running up to the First World War.

### **A Final Caveat – Large Companies versus Small**

One of the weaknesses of this study is its lack of attention to small businesses, and reliance on sources generated by large business. Many clerical workers in London in the period of this study worked in offices of one to ten clerks. As is argued in the first chapter, while middle to large scale companies were becoming more common they

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<sup>32</sup> Fifty-Sixth Report of the Civil Service Commission on the Civil Service; 1912-13, Cd. 6332, Vol. XV, 17<sup>th</sup> May, 1912, p. 147.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, A.L. Bowley, Wages and Income in the United Kingdom Since 1860, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937), p. 127.

were still the exception. A study which focuses too much on the latter will consequently somewhat distort the general picture.

This emphasis on large businesses was due, as in often the case in histories which relate to business, to a lack of sources. Large institutions such as the railway companies, banks and the Civil Service left behind records for posterity, small concerns, unfortunately, usually did not. I was consequently able to find very few business archives of small companies.

It is here, however, that the oral sources and diaries are important. Many of the clerks in these sources, such as William Evans, worked in small businesses. They thus provide important insights into the world of the small office. In addition, some of the reports and advice journals referred to smaller operations and clerical work within these. While these sources do not give as complete a picture as might be hoped, they nevertheless provide some information which this study has attempted to utilise. In addition, subjects dealt with such as education and shifts in London's economy affected all clerks regardless of where they worked. In sum, the lack of sufficient attention to small businesses should be kept in mind while reading the study, while at the same time it should not detract too much from its overall relevance and significance.



## **Chapter I**

### **Changing Worlds and Changing People – A Definition of the Late Victorian and Edwardian London Clerk**

#### **Four Clerks**

‘Honour to whom honour is due’, announced The Clerk, journal of the National Union of Clerks, in August 1890, in relation to the death of Mr A.T. Philpott, for some years clerk to the St. George’s School Board. In this role Philpott was responsible for elementary education in this London borough. Prior to this, he had been head master of the Russell Town British School in Bristol, a position in which he was said to have gained wide experience, and won the confidence and esteem of his brother elementary school teachers. He had also been a member of the Educational Council and had been recognised as an authority on elementary educational matters.<sup>1</sup>

In 1900 in the East End of London, A. Wilkinson was working as an Abroad Clerk for Trumans Brewery. He earned in that year a salary of £850 a year and would retire in 1903 on a yearly pension of £600.<sup>2</sup> As can be inferred from his salary, an Abroad Clerk was a position of great prestige and responsibility in the British brewing industry at this time. Contrary to expectation, Wilkinson spent most of his time outside the office. Most public houses in this period were tied to a brewery from which they received their beverages. Abroad Clerks acted as the link between the breweries and these premises. They were the eyes and ears of the breweries,

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<sup>1</sup> The Clerk, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1890, p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> London Metropolitan Archives B/THB/F 3, ‘Messrs Truman, Hanbury, Buxton and Co., Brewer’s Clerks Salaries and Rest Expenses, 1898-1920’.

inspecting their properties, guarding against adulteration and fraud, making sure orders and payments were collected and negotiating orders and the weekly returns of unsold beer. They were, in effect, the outdoor representatives of the brewing houses and their importance was such, for example, that a proposal was made in Trumans in 1908 to provide each of them with a car and driver.<sup>3</sup>

In 1902, on his way to school, Sydney Moseley, aged 14, bumped into an old class mate who had already 'gone out into the world.' Moseley was told by him that there was a vacancy as a clerk at the Counting House of Waterlow & Sons in the City and was advised to give up school and take the job. On that very day he skipped school, had his mother cut down to size for him (from his brother) an impromptu pair of trousers and that very day started working for Waterlows, joining the army of the tens of thousands of City Commercial Clerks. Moseley started on a salary of eight shillings a week and initially was responsible for calling out rows of figures, requisitions for various numbered items, to a fellow clerk who checked them off. Though starting off with high hopes and some commitment Moseley quickly came to tire of his office work and gradual yearly increments. He resigned from Waterlows in May 1909, and following a brief flirtation with selling life policies for the Equitable Insurance Company went on to a successful life long career in journalism.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, in 1915 Lieutenant G.H. Lewis died while fighting on the Western Front in France. He had been given command of a Company on September 25<sup>th</sup> of that year. Before the outbreak of war in August 1914 Lewis had worked as a clerk in the Titles Department at the Prudential Assurance Company in Holborn Bars, London, having

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<sup>3</sup> T.R. Gourvish and R.G. Wilson, The British Brewing Industry, 1830-1980, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 238.

<sup>4</sup> The Private Diaries of Sydney Moseley (London: Max Parrish, 1960)

been transferred from 'L' Claim in 1913. He had been working for the company since 1903 and in the year of his transfer was earning £135 a year. Lewis while working for the Prudential had gained his LL. B. degree in 1909, taking honours in English Law, Colonial Constitutional Law and Roman Law. In 1913 he joined Middle Temple and commenced studying for the Bar where he took honours in each of his examinations. It was said that if his career had not met with so untimely an end he would have undoubtedly attained his Doctorate.<sup>5</sup>

Four very different men with four very different stories. Yet they shared in common the fact that they were clerks in London between 1880 and 1914. Did, however, the term 'clerk' in these examples, and thousands others like them, refer to the same type of work? Was there some common denominator in this period which bound all clerks together in one occupational field, in the same way as there was for tailors, for example? Additionally, if this was the case, how close was this signification, and conversely, how elastic should one be in its application?

This chapter aims to answer these questions. It will first argue that there were two very different uses of the term clerk, which though overlapping were mutually exclusive. One referred to a holder of office, the other to an individual who worked in an office. Having looked at this it will examine the later group in more detail. It will argue that increasingly in this period a dual labour market came to operate in the clerical market in London. On the one hand were well paid clerks who carried out

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<sup>5</sup> Archives of Prudential Plc, MS - 1292, 'Life Claim Department papers'.

responsible and often skilled jobs which offered good prospects for advancement. On the other were much more routine positions, what were referred to as 'mechanical' jobs which carried with them lower salaries, status and chances of promotion.

Following this it will look at how the economy and the employment market for clerical labour in London changed, paying particular attention to structural changes in the City of London, local and national government, and amalgamations in the service industries. In the latter half of the nineteenth century the City was transformed into a global centre of trade and finance, the State began to take on larger role in people's lives, and across a swathe of the tertiary sector there were a number of amalgamations which produced an ever increasing number of large scale bureaucratic organisations. In all these areas the work of businesses and government institutions became more complex. As a consequence there was a growing demand for specialised workers, and at the same time, with the increase in volume of work in many of these institutions, a growing demand for routine office labour. It was, therefore, as a result of these structural changes in the economy and the labour market that a dual labour market emerged, an understanding of which is crucial to define clerks and clerical work in this period. The chapter will end with an examination of clerical work in the above three areas, paying particular attention to the specialisation of clerical labour.

## **The Clerk Defined**

In 1909 Edward A. Cope, a clerk himself, published his book, Clerks, Their Rights and Obligations.<sup>6</sup> Noting that, 'The clerical career has a great past behind it: it is quite safe to say that it has a great future before it.'<sup>7</sup>, Cope, in his first chapter, proceeded to

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<sup>6</sup> Edward A. Cope, Clerks Their Rights and Obligations, (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, Ltd, 1909)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

give a comprehensive historical survey of clerks in which he traced the various contemporary uses of the term. Cope discovered clerks as far back as ancient Assyria and Egypt. The term clerk itself originated in the middle ages, all writing and accounting work being carried out by the clergy or clerics of the Church.<sup>8</sup>

Gradually there came to be a differentiation between different classes of clerks. Some were officers of the church who were not required to be priests. Thus there developed a distinction between 'clerks in holy orders' and other kinds of clerks. Over time the position became more secular, progressively separating itself from the church,

...It came to be applied as the designation of the 'officer who has charge of the records, correspondence, and accounts of any department, court, corporation, or society, and who superintends the general conduct of its business,' which is one of the definitions given in the 'New English Dictionary.' We use the word extensively in this sense, as for example in the titles 'Clerk of the Household,' 'Clerk of the Kitchen,' 'Clerk of the Crown,;' and 'Town Clerk...'<sup>9</sup>

Finally came the every-day use of the term, summed up in Dr. Murray's definition in the Chambers Dictionary as, 'One employed in a subordinate position in a public or private office, shop or warehouse, to make written entries, keep accounts, make fair copies of documents, do the mechanical work of correspondence and similar clerky work.'<sup>10</sup> Cope noted that although the final definition in the evolution of the term was

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. pp. 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pp. 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

by far the most commonly used, the other older definitions had not been ousted. There were still Clerks of Assize, Clerks of the Peace, and also Clerks in Holy Orders.

Clearly Mr A.T. Philpott and A. Wilkinson were clerks in the office holder sense.

Both had responsible positions, and would have been in charge of a large number of staff. A good example of this definition was The Clerk of the Peace, an office abolished in 1888 with the creation of County Councils. The Clerk, who can be seen as the link between the Crown and the Quarter Sessions in the counties throughout England and Wales, was perhaps the key county official before reform. He advised the sessions on issues of law and administration and kept its minutes. Throughout the year his responsibilities included drawing up indictments, lists of deeds and enclosure awards, and keeping records such as lists of poor law commissioners, candidates for posts of county officers and the decisions of arbitrations of corn rents. In addition to this, he was responsible for supplying copies to the public and correspondence in matters relating to the County and the Sessions. For performing these duties to the public he was entitled to a fee according to a fixed scale. With the abolition of the Quarter Sessions and the office his functions in the new County Councils went to the Clerk of the Council. The Clerk maintained his legal, administrative and advisory role and in addition became responsible for the ever growing personnel of the administration. He was by far the most senior officer.<sup>11</sup> In the capital, for example, following the abolition of the London County Council in 1965, he became the Director General of the new G.L.C.

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<sup>11</sup> See T.E. Headrick, The Town Clerk in English Local Government, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1962), pp. 198-9.

It is with the other definition of clerk, an individual who held a subordinate position in an office, that this study is concerned. The term, however, was, and has remained, problematic. It was felt that it was not elastic enough to cover the panoply of uses to which it was applied. As the magazine, The Office, commented in October 1889, ‘... ‘clerk’ is a general term admitting of no precise definition’<sup>12</sup> Having noted that the term had become completely revolutionised in meaning, the article commented that to some the word meant anyone employed in an office in any capacity apart from the manager, while to others the cashier, bookkeeper, stenographer and anyone not doing work of a purely routine nature would also be excluded. It was this failure to come to a precise definition that made the creation of a clerical union impossible. To make matters worse, as the term was felt to have a pejorative undertone, many people who were working in a clerical capacity refused to apply the term to themselves.

The Office adopted the latter definition, and not wishing to upset the sensibilities of its readers preferred to use the phrase ‘office workers’. In many respects, however, this definition was too exclusive. The term continued to be used throughout this period, and indeed up to the Second World War and beyond to refer to office workers encompassing virtually all grades of work both skilled and unskilled. The New Survey of London Life and Labour in 1934, for example, stated, ‘The term ‘clerk’ is applied to persons engaged in a large number of heterogeneous occupations of very different character and grade, the only common feature being that they work at a desk in an office’.<sup>13</sup> One important caveat that the above work in its chapter on clerical work contributed to a definition was that, ‘... clerical work...is not an industry in itself, but an occupation or service common to a large number of industries, and

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<sup>12</sup> The Office, October, 1889, p. 259.

<sup>13</sup> New Survey of London Life and Labour, Vol VII, (London: P.S. King and Son Ltd, 1934), p. 272.

generally speaking it may be distinguished from other commercial occupations by the fact that its technique is essentially concerned with methods of recording and accounting rather than with the nature of the transactions to which the records and accounts relate.<sup>14</sup>

Although it was frequently pointed out that what precluded any precise definition of clerk was the numerous industries and services they were spread across, it should be remembered that the work being carried out in all these areas was essentially the same; recording, accounting, registering, retrieving and corresponding. Arthur Whitlock, for example, during his fifty one years of clerking applied his clerical skills in the Army and Navy stores, marine insurance, the War Office, the Hearts of Oak Benefit Society and the National Insurance Board.<sup>15</sup>

## **The Dual Labour Market**

The Office did, however, have a point. There had been a revolution in clerical work. It was a change which explains the differences between G.H. Lewis and Sydney Moseley. Lewis worked in the Titles Department of the Prudential, a position which required legal training and specialised knowledge. If he had survived the war he would, undoubtedly, have progressed well in the company. Sydney Moseley's work on the other hand was less specialised. Although by the time he left Waterlow's in 1909, after nearly seven years service, he was doing some accountancy work and paying out wages, his work was still of a fairly routine nature. 'Oh! How hard it is to get on!' lamented Moseley in May, 1905, 'Sometimes I feel as if I can stand it no

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 273.

<sup>15</sup> British Library, Millennium Memory Bank C900/07507, 'Arthur Whitlock'.



longer and go along recklessly. Piles and piles of Requisitions – dreary, rotten REQUISITIONS; just calling out numbers endlessly – ‘4-5: 12-250’ – and so on.’<sup>16</sup>

By the 1870s, there had appeared a two tier system in clerical work. On the one hand were clerks whose work tended to be of a more specialised order, who were usually better educated and came from higher social backgrounds, who earned relatively high salaries and who had good promotional prospects throughout their careers. On the other hand, there were clerks whose work was much more routine and demanded less specialisation and skill. They were accordingly less well paid, had fewer prospects and were recruited usually from a lower social class.<sup>17</sup> While this two tier or dual labour clerical labour market was primarily structured by skill throughout the period of this study and beyond, it increasingly became gendered. This is perhaps one of the key developments in the history of the office. As Samuel Cohn and Ellen Jordan have argued, from the 1870s onwards, women were used in offices for secondary clerical work. Their higher education, their relatively high social status, their cheapness and most importantly, their readiness to work for relatively short periods of time made them ideal for employers for this type of labour.<sup>18</sup> This will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter V.

One of the best examples of a dual labour market can be seen in the Civil Service. As far back as 1855 the Northcote-Trevelyan Report had recommended a division of labour in the civil service based on those who carried out intellectual tasks and those

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<sup>16</sup> *The Private Diaries of Sydney Moseley*, p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> See B.G. Orchard, *The Clerks of Liverpool*, (Liverpool: J. Collinson, 1871), Chapter X.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Cohn, *The Process of Occupational Sex-Typing. The Feminization of Clerical Labor in Great Britain*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985). Ellen Jordan, ‘The Lady Clerks at the Prudential: The Beginning of Vertical Segregation by Sex in Clerical Work in Nineteenth-Century Britain’, *Gender and History*, Vol. 8, No. 1, April 1996, 65-81.

concerned with more mechanical work. The Playfair Commission in 1875 also spoke of the need of, ‘... making a distinction between those classes of clerks who do the higher and more responsible work, and those who do the inferior work’.<sup>19</sup> As a result of its recommendations an Order in Council of 12 February, 1876, established the Lower Division (subsequently the Second Division in 1890) and a class of boy clerks. Thus four classes were established; Administrative Officers and Higher Division Officers who were responsible for the administration of the Civil Service, and a clerical grade of Lower Division and Boy Clerks who were responsible for the day to day running of the Service. By 1914 the situation had become even more complex. In the clerical grades there were now Intermediate and Second Division Clerks, responsible for the higher grade work, and below them Boy Clerks, Assistant Clerks and Women Clerks who carried out more routine tasks. The 1914 Report of the Royal Commission on the Civil Service distinguished between administrative, clerical and routine work.<sup>20</sup> The difference between the latter two are a clear example of the dual labour market that was operating at this time in the clerical grades of the Civil Service. Candidates for the Second Division tended to come from higher clerical or shopkeeper backgrounds, had received some secondary education, had to sit an examination which reflected this, and had a pay scale from £70 to £300 with opportunities for higher staff positions and even entry (though very rare) into the First Division. Assistant Clerks, on the other hand, sat an easier examination, had a lower standard of education, and had a pay scale of £55 to £150, with access to some superintendent positions within the grade.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Fourth Report of the Royal Commission on the Civil Service; 1914 Cd 7378 Vol. XVI, p.12,

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 28.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. pp. 19-22. See also Jill Pellew, The Home Office 1848-1914 from Clerks to Bureaucrats, (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1982), Chapter 5.

Any account of the distinctions between clerical workers must therefore take note of the emergence of this dual labour market. As a popular saying of the period went, 'There were clerks, and there were CLURKS'<sup>22</sup>. While it is true that something similar to this had emerged in The East India Company before 1812 and to some extent in the railways, it is the increase in its application in the later part of the nineteenth century that signals such an important fissure in the clerical profession. Its heralding of women into the offices would for many radically reconfigure the nature of office work. This is not to say of course, that the dual labour market was operating everywhere. Such a system may have developed more slowly in smaller offices. In addition, it was possible for clerks within these offices to work their way up the various grades, from running message and copying manuscripts, to keeping accounts and writing correspondence, and finally to positions of trust within the office and management.<sup>23</sup> This, in fact, for many was an essential part of clerical work. Dual markets were not always so firmly established as in the Prudential or the Civil Service. It was possible, with perseverance, hard work, and some luck to switch from one side to the other. As Moseley, himself, wrote in his diary at the beginning of 1908, '...If I were to settle here in this Counting House, I could easily get somewhere'.<sup>24</sup> Boundaries were still fluid, clerical structures were constantly evolving. What is important in relation to the dual labour market was, however, that it was a growing trend which was incrementally having an important affect on the clerical profession.

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<sup>22</sup> The Clerk, February, 1912, p. 24

<sup>23</sup> See Paul Attewell, 'The Clerk Deskilled: A Study in False Nostalgia', Journal of Historical Sociology, Vol. 2 No. 4 December 1989.

<sup>24</sup> The Private Diaries of Sydney Moseley, p. 38.

## Changes in Economic, Company and Governmental Structures

What was producing the emergence of such a clerical market in London? In order to answer this question, analysis will focus on changes in the capital's office economy. In addition, companies and governmental departments should be examined. Changes in clerical work did not take place in a vacuum. They were to a large degree reflections of changes that were taking place both in the economy and in company and government administrative structures.<sup>25</sup> Between 1870 and 1914 seismic changes happened in both areas which were to have far reaching implications for clerical work.

Between 1871 and 1911 the number of people working in the City of London increased from 200,000 to 364,000, while the number of people residing there fell from 75,000 to 20,000.<sup>26</sup> At the same time the actual makeup of the working population was beginning to change. Between 1881 and 1911, for example, the total percentage of people employed in manufacturing in the City dropped from 30% to 18%. Similarly the proportion of individuals involved in commodities and trading fell from 38% to 27%. In comparison the percentage of workers involved in finance grew from 4% to 9% and those engaged in internal functions who serviced the needs of the City such as retail and transport grew from 10% to 28%.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For changes in company structure and organisation see John F. Wilson, British Business History, 1720-1994, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), Chapter IV.

<sup>26</sup> Ronald C. Michie, The City of London, (London: Macmillan Academic and Professional Ltd., 1992), p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

What is clear from these figures is that the City was never simply a financial or trading centre. Printers had the largest workforce in 1911 with 38,249 workers, followed by the Drapery and Allied Trades with 35,000.<sup>28</sup> It is also clear from the above figures that finance was gradually becoming more important, while manufacturing and commodities were becoming less so, with a large increase in the number of firms catering to the needs of those working in the City across a whole range of services from office fitters to hairdressers and chiropodists.<sup>29</sup> Concurrent with these changes was an increase in world trade. Total world exports at current prices (\$ Million) have been estimated to have grown from 4,747 in 1870 to 18,697 in 1913.<sup>30</sup>

These changes were not unconnected. Nor in fact were the changes in the nature of the work that was being carried out in the City. Important studies by Ronald C. Michie and David Kynaston have given a comprehensive portrayal of changes in the way the City operated in the latter half of the nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup> Michie, for example, has shown that over this period the City became less a centre for manually handling goods and more a centre for organising world trade. In relation to commerce, office trade as opposed to physical trade became more important to the City. Much of this had been due to the communication revolution which had preceded, and continued apace during this period. The development of the telegraph, railways, steam powered refrigerator ships, and later on the telephone and the wireless meant that an increasingly integrated national and more importantly global economy no longer

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<sup>28</sup> The City of London Day Census, 1911 Report, Guildhall Library, p. 41.

<sup>29</sup> See Michie, The City of London, Chapter 1.

<sup>30</sup> Arthur Lewis, 'The Rate of Growth of World Trade, 1830-1973' in Sven Grassman and Erik Lundberg (eds.), The World Economic Order. Past and Prospects, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1981), pp. 49-50.

<sup>31</sup> Michie, The City of London. David Kynaston, The City of London Volume II Golden Years 1890-1914, (London: Pimlico, 1995)

needed intermediate centres for trade. Producers and consumers were more and more able to conduct trade between themselves. As Michie writes, 'Increasingly continental Europe...drew its supplies of wheat, wool, rubber and copper directly from the producing countries and not via London, thus avoiding the costs and inconvenience of trans-shipment. Ports such as Antwerp, Amsterdam and Hamburg were all major rivals to London in an international competition for handling the world's trade, especially Europe's exports and imports'<sup>32</sup>. Similarly at home competition from Britain's regional ports, some closer to centres of production such as Liverpool, led to a decrease in the share of Britain's trade that London handled. By 1913, London was handling only 19 per cent of British exports and 33 percents of imports, measured in value.<sup>33</sup>

While London lost out in this area, it gained in others. With the emergence of a globally integrated economy there was a need for a single centre to act, in Kynaston's words as, '...fulcrum and mediator of the whole process'.<sup>34</sup> The very changes in technology which had led to a relative downturn in the importance of London's power to physically direct world trade paradoxically led to an upturn in its ability to control it. As Michie has noted, '...The result of this communications revolution was that it became possible to conduct a global trading business from an office in the City, maintaining constant contact supplemented by rapid visits and the receipt and despatch of samples and catalogues'.<sup>35</sup> Increasingly merchants, brokers and agents from both Britain and abroad gravitated to the City organising and controlling world trade, most of which never touched Britain's shores. Not only trade itself, but

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<sup>32</sup> Michie, p. 34.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Kynaston, *The City of London*, p. 17.

<sup>35</sup> Michie, p. 39.

shipping, finance, and a whole host of ancillary services fundamental to world trade such as insurance, law and accountancy located themselves in the Square Mile.

While such developments were going on apace in the City, equally rapid changes were taking place in Whitehall, local government in London, and throughout Britain as a whole. From the 1870s the State began increasingly to intervene in the social and economic lives of its citizens. Education, housing, public health, work, children's welfare, and other areas increasingly came under its remit. Analogous to world trade, as society became more complex, there was increasingly felt to be a need for it to be centrally regulated and controlled. This was accompanied by a general weakening in the belief in the doctrines of *lassiez-faire* and the overall consensus that a strictly non-interventionist government was the best answer for society's problems.<sup>36</sup> Such a change in outlook led to a growth in governmental administrative offices. Non-industrial civil service staffs (a large proportion of whom worked in the Post Office) grew from 53,874 to 172,353 from 1871 to 1911, and following the unprecedented spate of pre-War Liberal Government social legislation to 280,900 in 1914.<sup>37</sup> For the civil servants who worked in Whitehall, Somerset House and other central governmental offices, work grew in complexity and scale. At the Home Office, for example, Jill Pellew has shown an increase in the number of registered papers which annually had to be dealt with from 18,659 in 1862 to 71,153 in 1909. This administration was continually having to battle with the Treasury to increase the workforce in order to deal with such growing responsibilities. Papers by the then Home Secretary, Herbert Gladstone, show the achievements of the Home Office between 1906 and 1909 and give an impression of the scale of its activities. The

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<sup>36</sup> See Jose Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit. A Social History of Britain, 1870-1914*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), Chapters 7 & 8.

<sup>37</sup> B.V. Humphreys, *Clerical Unions in the Civil Service*, (London: Blackwell and Mott, 1958), p. 229.



department had been involved in the passage of forty-two bills, including the 1906 Workmen's Compensation Act, the 1907 Factory and Workshops Act, the 1908 Prevention of Crime Act and the 1908 Children Act. It had been involved in three royal commissions, ten select committees, twenty-one departmental committees and three special commissions.<sup>38</sup> Each major piece of legislation naturally resulted in an increased work load for the staff. The number of second division clerks at the Home Office increased from 11 in 1877 to 33 in 1914, while the number of more junior assistant clerks rose from 9 in 1896 to 54 in 1914, and the number of boy clerks from 4 to 37.<sup>39</sup>

Yet it was not just central government that experienced growth. Local government increased at an equally rapid pace. In 1888 County Councils were established and with it the LCC. For the first time in its history the capital had a popularly representative body. In 1894 under a further local government act urban district councils were also established. For the growing suburbs around London such as Ilford and Acton, home to many of the capital's clerks, this was a major shot in the arm in fostering growth, improved services and local identity.<sup>40</sup> Finally in 1899 the vestries were abolished and replaced by modern borough councils. Within eleven years no less than a revolution had taken place in London's local government. Alongside these structural reforms these various councils were given teeth to tackle the pressing social problems of the then largest city in the world. Education, transport, housing, public health, gas, water, lighting, food inspection, libraries, parks and a whole host of other social amenities became the responsibility in one shape or form of these various local

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<sup>38</sup> Jill Pellew, p. 77.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>40</sup> For the growth of Ilford in this period see Alan A. Jackson, Semi-Detached London Suburban Development, Life and Transport, 1900-39, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1973), Chapter 4.



bodies and their officials. It was indeed, as Tony Byrne has argued, the beginning of the golden age of local government.<sup>41</sup>

Finally any examination of changes in the economy of London in relation to clerical work must take note of the amalgamation movement which was taking place in many service industries. This is doubly important to emphasise as much of the work that has been done on the amalgamation movement in Britain in this period has concentrated on manufacturing industry. Consequently the picture one often has is that this was a period of lost opportunity for British industry to rationalise itself in preparation for the coming global competition of the next century.<sup>42</sup> While this may be true for some areas of the national economy such as cotton and steel, nothing can be further from the truth in relation to a broad spectrum of service industries which amalgamated and centred themselves in London.

### **The Growth of Bureaucracy**

Between 1870 and 1914 large scale amalgamations took place in the banking, insurance, railway, transport, and utility companies. All of these were major employers of clerical workers. Several factors contributed to the process. One was an increasingly integrated domestic economy, itself the product of the communication revolution mentioned earlier, which enabled economies of scale to be realised.

Another was growing competition and a third was legislative changes which facilitated the growth of joint stock companies. The end result of all of this was the

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<sup>41</sup> Tony Byrne, Local Government in Britain, (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 21.

<sup>42</sup> See P.L. Payne, 'The Emergence of the Large Scale Company in Great Britain, 1870-1914', Economic History Review, vol. 20, 1967, pp. 519-42. See also Wilson, British Business History, Chapter 4.

emergence, in many cases, of large scale bureaucratic companies which almost invariably came to have their headquarters in London.

In no area was the effects of amalgamation so deeply felt as in the Joint-Stock Banks. Between 1870 and 1914 these banks replaced private country and town banks as the predominate form of banking in the U.K. By 1914 regional banking networks had spread over the whole of the country. As J.F. Davis wrote in 1910,

The last thirty years had witnessed a vast change in the growth and relative magnitude of the London Joint Stock Banks. At the beginning of the period there were only three Joint Stock Banks with a capital of £1,000,000 each, and with current and deposit accounts of more than £20,000,000...There are now nine Banks whose average capital is £3,000,000 each, and whose deposit and current accounts exceed an average of £50,000,000...These changes have been brought about almost entirely by amalgamations.<sup>43</sup>

The corollary of such increases in capital was increases in staff (clerks and senior management). In 1909 Lloyd's Bank had over 2,880 staff, the London County and Westminster 2,032. By 1914 the latter had grown to 3,250 though this was eclipsed by the 5,000 who worked for The Midland Bank in this year.<sup>44</sup> Although most of these worked in the branch networks, a significant proportion worked at head office or had passed through it at one point in their careers. The merger of the London and County

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<sup>43</sup> J.F. Davis, Bank Organisation, Management and Accounts, (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1910), p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> Edwin Green, Debtors to their Profession. A History of The Institute of Bankers 1879-1979, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1979), p.87 & p. 89.

and London and Westminster in 1909, for example, produced a joint central administration of over 600 personnel.<sup>45</sup>

The extent of the amalgamation movement in London in relation to office work can be seen in the following examples. In 1902 The Metropolitan Water Act created the Metropolitan Board with 3,463 staff, 556 of whom were officers.<sup>46</sup> The Port of London came into existence by act of parliament in 1909 merging the various ports and staffs of the Metropolis.<sup>47</sup> In 1911 the Prudential's headquarters, Holborn Bars, had a staff of over 2,000.<sup>48</sup> Paddington, the headquarters of the Great Western Railway, employed over 1,300 staff in 1922.<sup>49</sup> Yet the epithet of largest office in London went to the Railway Clearing House located in Seymour Street just off Euston Station, with a workforce of over 2,500 clerks in its central office in 1914.<sup>50</sup> In addition to this the Civil Service, the L.C.C. and some London borough councils were large scale employers of clerical staff.

This is not to argue that by the eve of the First World War London clerks had been transformed into thousands of employees of large scale bureaucracies. The majority of London clerks still worked in small to medium sized offices of no more than twenty or thirty staff. According to the 1911 Day Census of The City of London, for example, 3,811 firms of Agents, Exporters and Importers had a total of 33,002 employers and

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<sup>45</sup> See The Royal Bank of Scotland Group (hereafter RBSG) Archives GB 1502/WES/125/12 'London, County and Westminster Bank Staff Register 1911-12'.

<sup>46</sup> W.S. Chevalier, London's Water Supply, 1903-53. A Review of the Works of the Metropolitan Water Board, (London: Staple Press Ltd, 1953), p. 331.

<sup>47</sup> See Sir Joseph G. Broadbank, History of the Port of London, (London: Daniel O'Connor, 1921), Chapter XXXI.

<sup>48</sup> Laura Dennett, A Sense of Security: 150 Years of Prudential, (Cambridge: Granta Editions, 1998), p.155.

<sup>49</sup> National Archives, RAIL 253/140, 'Great Western Railway Classification of Station Masters, Goods Agents and Clerks, 1922'.

<sup>50</sup> See Philip Bagwell, The Railway Clearing House in the British Economy, 1842-1922, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1968), p. 139.

employees, giving an average of 8.66 per firm.<sup>51</sup> Many City Commercial firms were able to possess small staffs and still enjoy large economies of scale via the existence of London's various exchanges. In addition, large numbers of London's commercial clerks worked in thousands of small workshops that predominated on the capital's manufacturing side, yet even here there were major exceptions such as the Woolwich Arsenal. London's commercial, financial and industrial base was too vast to generalise over. The fact remains, however, that a substantial minority of clerks did work in large scale bureaucracies, and their number continued to grow. Out of the sixteen London clerks looked at in this research from diaries and interviews, for example, seven can be said with some certitude to have been in the latter category.

### **Clerical Specialisation**

The emergence of the City as the control centre of world trade, the growth of central and local government, the amalgamation movement in large sectors of Britain's service industries, all combined to produce in the clerical profession a dual labour market with a growing demand for specialised clerical labour. In this final section, clerical work in all these sectors will be examined. Particular attention will be paid to how these changes led to an increased demand for specialised clerical labour, with a brief discussion of the emergence of a class of lower skilled clerical workers at the end.

As the City increasingly became a centre of world trade and finance, work became more complex. In relation to the various markets which comprised the City, for

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<sup>51</sup> London Guildhall Library, The City of London Day Census, 1911, p. 41.

example, Michie argues, 'Within the growing complexity of both the national and international economy there developed a need for specialist intermediaries to act between these intermediaries [i.e. producers and suppliers]'.<sup>52</sup> In 1909, for example, Antony Gibbs and Sons Ltd, merchants and foreign bankers shut down their Liverpool offices and moved its work and staff to London. One of the members of staff affected by these changes was a clerk named Frederick Hunt. Hunt worked in the Produce Division of the office as a correspondent clerk. In that year he was 55 years old, earned £225 a year and had been with the company since 1880. Hunt was by this period head of the Australian and West Indian Department and was responsible, as his title suggests, for its correspondence. In addition to this he was in charge of part of the correspondence of the West Coast Department. He had also for nearly a year, due to the illness of a colleague, had the selling of 'G & Co.'s', presumably a client company of the firm, produce in his own hands.<sup>53</sup> Arthur Whitlock was also progressing well. Since leaving the Army and Navy Stores he had been working for a Marine Insurance Firm covering cargoes of meat and eggs from countries such as Denmark, Russia and Argentina. By 1914 he was in charge of the Policy Department concerning goods from Argentina.<sup>54</sup>

The growth of specialisation in commercial clerks was attested to by the content of a host of advise manuals to clerks who told their readers that a knowledge of the 3 R's was no longer sufficient to 'get on' in the clerical world. F.B. Crouch, for example, advised young school boys eager for a career in the office that,

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<sup>52</sup> Michie, p. 21.

<sup>53</sup> London Guildhall Library, MS-11,069D, 'Antony Gibbs and Sons Ltd, Liverpool House: papers relating to the closure of Liverpool House in 1908'.

<sup>54</sup> British Library, Millennium Mind Bank, C900/07507, 'Arthur Whitlock'.

Our commercial relations all over the world at the present day are so extensive, that most firms in this country have business connections, to a greater or less degree, abroad, and, as French is the foreign tongue most in vogue, German ranking next, the boy who is acquainted with either or both of these languages is not likely to have to wait long for a berth as the boy would who is unfamiliar with them, and has a chance of obtaining a better one.<sup>55</sup>

Hazlehurst Greaves went further. Beginning with the dictum that,

The clerk of today bears no relation to the individual of thirty years ago, when a knowledge of the 'Three R's' formed the indispensables of success. The present-day clerk who desires to succeed must have knowledge: he must know everything concerning the business in which he is engaged, and must act as consulting library and encyclopaedia to his principal, further, he must be acquainted with all the short cuts to business success.<sup>56</sup>

He went on to list the various skills that a clerk who wanted promotion now needed. These included a knowledge of history, particularly that of wars and the growth of free trade, a knowledge of the commercial relations which then existed between Britain and the Foreign Powers, a grasp of commercial geography, proficiency in shorthand and bookkeeping, and of course a command of modern languages. For Greaves, however, these were just some of the basic skills that the aspiring clerk now needed.<sup>57</sup> While most clerks did not directly conduct business, it was emphasised that

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<sup>55</sup> F.B. Crouch, *From School to Office, Written for Boys*, (London: Effingham Wilson & Co., 1890), p. 13.

<sup>56</sup> Hazlehurst Greaves, *The Commercial Clerk and His Success*, (London: Cassell & Co., 1909), p. 7.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, particularly Chapters 1 to 3.

specialisation was needed to assist efficiently their masters and employers in these increasingly complex transactions. In order to operate effectively, these professions became more and more dependent on a group of specialist clerks who were able to supply them with the expert back up they required.

Specialisation was equally evident amongst civil servants. Increasingly complex legislation to meet the demands of a more multifaceted society resulted in the growing need of specialised staff to administer and execute these enactments. In addition, more and more was being demanded of civil servants. The 1914 Civil Service Commission, for example, noted that,

In recent years the activity of the legislature (especially in connection with problems arising out of the conditions of social and industrial life) has placed a large number of new Acts upon the Statute Book. These Acts are in some cases of extreme complexity and impose upon the Department administering them obligations of a serious nature, which occasionally go far towards obliterating the distinction hitherto maintained between legislative, executive, and judicial functions.<sup>58</sup>

Giving evidence to the Commission, the Chairman of the Board of Customs and Excise stated,

The work of a taxing department today is an absolutely different thing from what it was twenty, or even ten, years ago. In those days Parliament, when it

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<sup>58</sup> Report from the Royal Commission on the Civil Service 1914, p. 28.

fixed a tax, settled every detail, leaving to the department only the administration of the tax on the lines laid down by Parliament. The tendency of Parliament nowadays...is to lay down only principles to the discretion of the department. I think it is fair to say that a department like mine nowadays exercises powers which are often judicial and which sometimes get near to being legislative.<sup>59</sup>

These points have been echoed by Pellew in her study of the Home Office. Laws increasingly contained only the fundamental principles from which technical or administrative details were to be worked out and applied by civil servants. 'Officials', Pellew writes, 'were delegated powers to make rules made by a third party (such as managers of mines or prison authorities)'.<sup>60</sup> Second Division clerks in their support role were mainly responsible for the organisation of incoming and outgoing correspondence, the accounts of the Home Office, the metropolitan police courts, 'special police', and the reformatory and industrial schools, and preparing statistical reports covering all the aspects of the department's work for governmental and public consumption. All of this needed technical, and often legal knowledge.<sup>61</sup>

Such growth in responsibility and administrative skill was mirrored among the officials of the London County Council. Following its establishment in 1889 the L.C.C. embarked on new projects, and applied itself to the existing responsibilities of the former Metropolitan Board of Works with increased vigour. In the 1890s it began an innovative scheme of slum clearance and public housing, in addition to establishing its own Public Works Department. In 1898 it took over London

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Jill Pellew, *The Home Office 1848-1914*, p. 88.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. Chapter 5.



Tramways, and in 1904 it took over the responsibilities of the London School Board. This expansion witnessed a corresponding rise in its labour force. In 1890 there were 3,369 council employees, 12,000 in 1904 and 35,316 in 1905. In 1909 the L.C.C. claimed to be London's largest employer.<sup>62</sup>

Such a volcanic rise in its workforce and responsibilities resulted in a corresponding addition to its central official staff at its headquarters in Spring Gardens, just off Trafalgar Square in Central London. In 1889 164 officials worked at the L.C.C.'s central offices, in 1899 this was 412, and in 1909 stood at 1,267. A corresponding increase was seen in its temporary official staff, responsible for the more routine aspects of office work such as typing and filing and temporary increases in work, who later became part of the Minor Establishment in 1902, a body akin to the Assistant Clerks of the Civil Service. Their numbers in 1895 stood at 120 and rose to 280 in 1902. By 1910 there were 700 such office workers along with other grades such as Boy Clerks and female typists.

The work of the officials of the L.C.C., who would later in 1904 become part of the Major Establishment was no less skilled than that of the Second Division, and in some cases more so as there was no higher grade above them. Similarly though the work of the Minor Division was of a lower clerical grade its work was becoming increasingly technical with more of it being devoted to permanent rather than temporary work. An excellent document which provides a valuable insight into the work of these officials is a detailed report which the Head of the Statistical Department, Laurence Gomme, sent to the Establishment Committee in 1898. The report dealt with the work of his

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<sup>62</sup> Gloria Clifton, 'Members and Officers of the L.C.C., 1889-1965', in Andrew Saint (ed.), Politics and the People of London. The London County Council, 1889-1965, (London: The Hambledon Press, 1989), pp. 9-10.

department and included an outline of its responsibilities, the role and duties of each officer within it, and the work they had been occupied with in the current week. The department dealt with a whole range of responsibilities which included; the compilation of the ongoing volumes of 'London Statistics', work on County Rates, returns for fire insurance companies, the certification of rates and taxes payable by the Council, the accounts and charges of electrical lighting companies, the distribution of representation on vestries and district boards, reports and returns for Council bills in Parliament, and the Council's library.

The department had sixteen established officials, excluding Gomme, and eleven temporary clerks. Of the sixteen permanent staff, all but three juniors had their own specialised areas. A Mr. D.B. Roche, for example, worked on water statistics, and dealt with royal commission and Parliamentary matters affecting questions other than County taxation. His colleague Mr. A.F. Hoare was responsible for electric lighting companies' accounts, fire invoice returns, and assisted his colleagues Messers J.C Spenseley and H.H. Beadle in analysing accounts in connection with London statistics, telephones and local taxation matters. Beadle, himself, that week had been working on the Expenditure and Taxation Returns for 1896-7, analysing the accounts of vestries and central bodies, dealing with forms for the analysis of local accounts, working on rates payable by the Council, and dealing with the deficiency of the Poor Rates for Tower Bridge.<sup>63</sup>

In both national and local government in London there is thus evidence of increasing specialisation and expertise. With growth in responsibility and scope came an

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<sup>63</sup>London Metropolitan Archives, CL/ESTAB/1/393, 'L.C.C. Establishment Committee Papers, 21<sup>st</sup> July 1898'.

increasing professionalism amongst government officers. In addition, as higher ranking officials took on more responsibilities they downgraded some of their simpler duties to grades below them. There was thus a pull effect whereby a rise in skill in one grade led to a general increase in skill in the grades beneath them.<sup>64</sup>

The railway industry will be examined as an example of a large scale bureaucratic company produced via a process of amalgamation and the growth of a specialised workforce. Railway companies also took part in the amalgamation process in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Following a wave of amalgamation between 1880 and 1910, fifteen companies in 1911, many of them regional monopolies, controlled 84 per cent of total mileage.<sup>65</sup> Peter Yardley, for example, has estimated that while the General Post Office in 1907 was Britain's largest civilian employer, with a staff of 199,178, the next six biggest concerns were railway concerns, with the largest, the London & North Western Railway Company, employing 84,377 workers. Out of the sixteen biggest employers, ten were estimated to be railway companies.<sup>66</sup> The Board of Trade estimated that there were 608,750 railway employees in Britain and Ireland in 1910, among which were included 79,089 railway clerks.<sup>67</sup> London, as the centre of the railway industry, was affected by these changes. All main lines ran to London, and all major railway companies, with the notable exception of the North Eastern, had their main termini there. In addition the head offices of many of the most important

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<sup>64</sup> See the evidence of Mr. Edmund Phipps, Principal Assistant Secretary of the Elementary Education Branch of the Board of Education, Fifty-Sixth Report of the Civil Service Commission; 1912-13 Cd. 6332, Vol. XV, 26<sup>th</sup> April, 1912.

<sup>65</sup> Jack Simmons and Gordon Biddle (eds.), The Oxford Companion to British Railway History, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 431.

<sup>66</sup> Peter Wardley, 'The Emergence of Big Business: The Largest Corporate Employers of Labour in the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States, c. 1907', Business History, Vol. 41, October 1999, No.4

<sup>67</sup> The Railway Clerk, June, 1911, p. 119.

railways, including the Great Western, the Great Northern, and the London and North Western were situated in the Metropolis.

The business concerns of the railways were manifold, and as they increased in scale as a result of amalgamation and expansion, their interests naturally grew. Main sources of revenue for railway companies were the transit of people and goods. In relation to the former, railway companies, particularly around London, Manchester, Liverpool and other major cities, were developing suburban lines during this period. Many of the suburbs in metropolitan Essex which grew up in the 1880s and 1890s, for example, owed much of their development to line extension by the Great Eastern. In many cases the company worked in direct conjunction with builders and developers.<sup>68</sup> Another important source of income was shipping. Most of the main railway companies had a fleet of steamers and had developed ports, the North-Eastern at Hull, the GWR at Fishguard, the London and South Western at Southampton, and the Great Eastern at Harwich, for example. These ports and fleets were used as much for travel and leisure as they were for trade. In relation to the latter, railway companies played a major role in developing the holiday industry. They owned hotels, organised excursions, helped develop seaside resorts, and organised holidays and trips abroad. In 1914, for example, one was able to buy a ticket (or rather a series of tickets) to Japan from Liverpool Street Station.<sup>69</sup> For those with less time on their hands and a taste for less exotic locations the company heavily promoted excursions to resorts along the east coast such as Yarmouth and Southend. Finally, railway companies produced much of their own rolling stock. In railway towns such as Crewe, Swindon, Derby and Stratford locomotives and carriages were designed, built and maintained.

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<sup>68</sup> See Alan A. Jackson, *Semi-detached London*, Chapter 4.

<sup>69</sup> *The Great Eastern Magazine*, 1914, p. 43.

In addition, many of the companies were self sufficient, producing, for example, their own gas and electricity. The Great Eastern Railway even had its own printing press.<sup>70</sup>

In all of these activities clerks were involved.

With the growth of companies through amalgamation, the increase in markets, the introduction of more sophisticated and powerful technologies and the leap in revenues in the entire railway industry from an estimated £45,078,143 in 1870 to over £123,000,000 in 1910<sup>71</sup>, railway clerical work became more complex and specialised.

This phenomena was clearly outlined by Mr. E.C. Geddes, the chief goods manager of the North Eastern Railway in a speech given at the York Railway Lecture and Debating Society in 1910, which was subsequently printed in the Railway News.

Taking 'Education and the Advancement of the Railway Clerk' as his theme, Geddes devoted a large part of his speech to the theme of specialisation in railway clerical work. He began this section by discussing railway companies in the forties, fifties, and sixties, '...The railway companies in those days were smaller concerns. The method of working was more primitive. The clerks were far more in touch with the various aspects of railway work than they can possibly be to-day. The posts at the top were not, as a rule, so onerous, and the men looking towards them for promotion had pretty clear ideas about the work demanded in these appointments.'<sup>72</sup> The situation was compared by Geddes to the present situation in the railways which he saw as being typified by specialisation and concentration. He argued that the work of the railway clerk had changed in much the same way, and his comments deserve to be quoted in full:

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 1911, p. 110.

<sup>71</sup> Railway Clerks Association, The Life of a Railway Clerk, Some Interesting Facts and Figures, London: The Railway Clerks Association, 1911), p. 31.

<sup>72</sup> The Railway News, 'Education and Advancement of the Railway Clerk', 1910.

In early days a clerk at a station saw the reception, loading, despatch, and working of traffic generally, as well as taking part in the clerical work, setting the claims and dealing with the public. To-day at the smaller country station he does get an all-round experience, and we may, I think, call the clerk fortunate who gets a portion of his early training at a small station; but the vast majority of the staff on a large railway cannot possibly obtain that thorough training in every branch, and if they are to acquire a general knowledge it must be by other means than by engaging in each branch of the work themselves...

The reorganisation of 1902, with its clear definition of the functions of the train officers, was a great stride towards specialisation, and we can trace the same process within the department. Probably every railway used to dabble in figures, but with the starting of the Traffic Statistics Office, and the systematic circulation of statistical information amongst the Company's officers, a new field was created for the comparatively small numbers of men who are gifted with the particular ability in interpreting statistics. Again, sub-departments have been formed at head quarters to control the supply of wagons, the working of motor vehicles and the cartage of goods traffic. Advertising is the sole concern of a separate office. An inspector has been appointed to supervise the heating and lighting of the Company's premises. The inauguration of the commercial agency emphasised the distinction between the functions of the man who creates and obtains traffic and his operating colleague who is expert at moving traffic economically. Lastly, the development of the Continental business in recent years has led to the creation of an office where a wide

knowledge of shipping and general business is indispensable. These examples by no means exhaust the list.<sup>73</sup>

This trend of growing specialisation was repeated in the other major railway companies as a detailed survey of the various departments and offices of the Great Eastern Railway in its company magazine between September, 1912 and May 1914 showed.<sup>74</sup> All the above departments were listed and a number of others including the Season Tickets Office, the Excursions Office, and The Trains Delay Section were given. The complexity of its internal structure was, perhaps, revealed by the length of time the monthly magazine took to give its readers an adequate impression of the various departments, offices and sections of the company.

The converse of such specialisation was the growth in demand for clerks to perform more routine, 'mechanical tasks'. In all the examples given above such labour was evident. In the City, for example, there was a large increase in female and juvenile labour. Moseley started work in Waterlows aged 14, as did many other boys his age around the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>75</sup> In both national and local government service boy clerks and female typists were introduced.<sup>76</sup> At the same time lower clerical grades were established, the Assistant Clerks in the Civil Service in 1904 and the Minor Establishment in the L.C.C. in 1902. In all these areas the creation of such grades was due to the large increases in routine work, and in all cases the aim was to save money.<sup>77</sup> In addition, with the increase in specialised clerical labour some

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> The Great Eastern Railway Magazine, September, 1912 to May, 1914.

<sup>75</sup> Sydney Moseley, p. xi.

<sup>76</sup> See Humphreys, Clerical Unions in the Civil Service, pp. 54-8. See also Edmund Phipps evidence in, Fifty-Sixth Report of the Civil Service Commission, 26<sup>th</sup> April, 1912.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. See also Red Tape, 1911-14, journal of the Assistant Clerks Association.

clerical work became more routine. As A.W. Solten, a senior officer of the Great Western in a letter to G.K. Mills, its Secretary, noted in 1900 in regard to clerical work, ‘...The successful management and administration of a Railway depends very largely on the zealous and capable discharge, by a contented staff of duties, some of mere detail and routine, others involving in a greater or less degree the exercise of thought and judgement.’<sup>78</sup> Train stations increasingly, for example, came to be controlled by head and regional offices, railway clerks there losing some of their autonomy. One important element in the history of railway clerks was the dissatisfaction of this lower clerical grade with their income and general working conditions as was evidenced by the growth and increasing militancy of the Railway Clerks Association, much, perhaps, to the disappointment of Solten and other senior railway officials like him.<sup>79</sup>

## Conclusion

Two distinct definitions of the word ‘clerk’ have been presented in this chapter; a holder of office and an individual who worked in an office in an executive rather than administrative sense, an individual who as The Clerk neatly put it in 1890, enabled a business to know exactly where it was, what was due, what was owing, what was the cash balance and once knowing this, enabled it to arrange fresh bargains and open new undertakings.<sup>80</sup> It is this second definition that this study will use. As the economy and society became more complex in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as company structures developed and terms of trade changed, clerical work

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<sup>78</sup> National Archives RAIL 258/400, ‘Clerical staff: recruiting, examination of, 1877-1914’, letter from A.W. Solten to G.K. Mills, 14<sup>th</sup> November, 1900.

<sup>79</sup> See Malcolm Wallace, Single or Return? The History of the Transport Salaried Staffs’ Association, (London: Transport Salaried Staffs’ Association, 1996), Chapters 1 to 6.

<sup>80</sup> The Clerk, August, 1890, p. 3.



became more manifold, both in terms of the tasks it performed and the responsibilities it undertook. With this development definitions of clerks became more problematic. Some commentators came up with various formulas, others tried to use the term as little as possible, some tried to use it not at all, doubting the continued validity of its usage. The continued use of the term, however, means that some kind of working historical definition must be devised for the term if the group it refers to is to be historically analysed.

The solution to this problem can be found, as this chapter has argued, in the use of dual labour theory. Changes in clerical labour came about due to the growing complexity of the economy and society and with it business and governmental administration. The result of this was in some, but not all cases, the emergence of two types of clerical workers, the specialised and the more mundane, two types of clerks who carried out different but complementary work. If we take the above definition with the qualification that this was a process that was still very much evolving at the time and cannot be applied to all offices in London, especially the smaller ones, and, in addition, that movement was possible from secondary to primary positions, one is provided thereby with a working tool to examine the history of this important group of London workers.

## **Chapter II**

### **Work, Income, Promotion and Stability – The Late Victorian and Edwardian London Clerk Revisited.**

Between 1870 and 1914 clerks in Victorian and Edwardian Britain have been portrayed as being increasingly under strain. Following 1870, it has been argued, with the widespread availability of education and the large increase in clerical numbers, clerks came to suffer serious status anxiety. Their literary and numerical skills suddenly became available to a much wider group, and with growth in numbers the clerical dream of working ones way up into a partnership was becoming increasingly impossible. In addition, because so many individuals were entering the clerical profession the market was argued to be overstocked with the result that salaries were stagnating or falling, and unemployment was becoming more and more prevalent. Growth in the size of companies also led to a breakdown in relations with employers and the deskilling of clerical work by the introduction of a rigid division of labour. Finally clerks were being assailed throughout the period by the introduction of women, youths, foreigners and technology in the office. The clerk, however, shackled by his beliefs in his respectability, loyalty to his employer and distaste of anything that smacked of the working classes, refused to unionise to protect himself. The whole tragedy of the black coated worker was that his conceit and ‘false consciousness’ precluded him from taking action against his steadily worsening market situation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Gregory Anderson, Victorian Clerks, (Manchester: Manchester University, 1976)

The origins of the above had its origins in arguments that were being presented at the time by a number of clerical trade unions that were beginning to appear. These unions, via their journals, portrayed a golden past when clerks were given a fair wage by their employers with whom they enjoyed close relations.<sup>2</sup> Work was engaging, provided satisfaction and offered the aspiring young man with talent an opportunity to become his own master. All this was to change, however, with the coming of the latter stages of capitalism in Britain. With the increase in competition and scale of economic activity relations between clerks and employers broke down. The spread of education made his skills less exclusive. Masters increasingly attempted to drive down wages, foreigners, youths, women and technology were brought into the office in increasing numbers in an effort to do so and work became progressively more disenchanting.<sup>3</sup>

As has been argued in the Introduction, this account was faithfully passed on to future generations by the work of successive commentators. Klingender represented it in the 1930s, Braverman and Anderson in the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> Its most recent appearance came in 1998 via R. Guerriero Wilson's account of Glaswegian clerks, 1880-1914.<sup>5</sup> What was originally an argument put forward by a group of small but very vocal and ideologically driven trade unions has become today historical dogma.

This chapter aims to examine the veracity of these claims. Did clerks suffer status anxiety and even crisis? Were their salaries being hammered down, their positions

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<sup>2</sup> See especially *The Clerk* and *The Railway Clerk*.

<sup>3</sup> See *The Clerk*, in particular its first two editions.

<sup>4</sup> F.D Klingender, *The Condition of Clerical Labour in Britain*, (London: Martine Lawrence, 1935), H. Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), Anderson, *Victorian Clerks*.

<sup>5</sup> R. Guerriero Wilson, *Disillusionment or New Opportunities? The Changing Nature of Work in Offices, Glasgow 1880-1914*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1998).

threatened by the 'invasion of new recruits' into the office? Did their prospects weaken while their jobs themselves become ominously less secure? The question of income will be first discussed. If the clerical market was overstocked one would therefore expect to see a down turn in salaries. Examination of clerical salaries in London from a selected group of companies in fact do not suggest that this was the case; salaries were rising not falling. While this may not be conclusive proof for income rises in all clerical sectors, particularly in secondary clerical labour markets, it is nevertheless evidence that clerical salaries were not as volatile as has been suggested. Following this, the question of clerical work will be analysed. How far are the claims true that changes in the economy and company structure affected clerks. Were the doors of promotion and independence closing in their faces? Again the answer appears to be in the negative. The promotional policies of the London County Council, the railway companies, in particular the Great Western, and the London County and Westminster Bank will be examined. It will be argued that all three organisations had a strong commitment to internal promotion for all positions, and that their practices conformed to this. This policy was reflected in most organisations. Companies and government offices preferred to recruit internally because they realised that the prospects of promotion would attract strong applicants to the company and once appointed they would be motivated to work hard with the goal of promotion in mind. Such a policy was therefore beneficial to both employer and employee.

In addition, it will be argued that the belief that opportunities for promotion decreased rapidly as a result of the large influx of clerks is questionable because it does not take into account the fact that as organisations became bigger the number of responsible

positions within them grew with the increase in their personnel, thereby maintaining an equilibrium for promotional opportunities. Side by side with this, the argument that it was relatively common for clerks to become masters before 1870 appears to be extremely dubious. There is not much evidence of this, and those clerks that did were usually men from relatively prosperous backgrounds who could bring capital into the company with them. In addition, there is little evidence to suggest that the possibility for London clerks to set up their own businesses was diminishing. The argument, therefore, that career prospects for clerks in this period were deteriorating should be questioned.

Finally, the security of clerks' positions will be looked at. Were clerks increasingly falling victim to unemployment? Clerks did suffer from unemployment, but there is no strong evidence to indicate a deterioration in job security. The limited evidence there is suggests that clerks suffered far less from unemployment than other groups such as skilled manual workers. There did exist, however, a group of older unemployed clerks who, due to the nature of clerical unemployment, once out of a job found it extremely difficult to find a new one. The general picture, however, appears to be that the extent of clerical unemployment has been much exaggerated.

Furthermore this section will argue that a far more serious problem of the period was underemployment, the lack of consistent full-time work, rather than unemployment. It was this phenomenon, rather than unemployment itself which encouraged many parents, from skilled working class and small business owning backgrounds, as well as clerks, to place their sons into clerical positions. It was, in fact, the stability of the clerks position which attracted so many to it. Overall, it will be argued that there are serious grounds to question the idea that there was any serious crisis in clerking in the

Late-Victorian and Edwardian period. This is not to argue, however, that status crisis, the fear of losing social respect, was never far from the back of the minds of many clerical workers.

## **Clerical Incomes**

In 1908 in the first edition of the rejuvenated journal, The Clerk, the President of the National Union of Clerks, wrote,

A generation back, clerks as a rule, were recognised as persons of some importance to the world, and no inconsiderable number of them received payment commensurate with that importance. With the wider spread of rudimentary commercial and professional education, the clerk has lost, not in real importance, but in the power of impressing his importance upon those who utilise his services. The law of supply and demand is temporarily against him, and he has shown a very lamentable tendency to solace himself with the shadow of His Lost Respectability which is priggish of him, and does not help him in the struggle for recognition and respect.<sup>6</sup>

The natural adjunct of this development was that clerical employment markets were overstocked and clerical incomes were falling. An article in the magazine, for example, on 'The Clerk and Trade Unionism' the following month argued,

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<sup>6</sup> The Clerk, January, 1908, p. 2

...The supply of the ordinary 'common or garden' clerk is already greater than the demand, and with increasing educational facilities the supply will keep greatly ahead of the demand. Instead of turning their attention to trades, or to professions, requiring technical knowledge and skill, many continue to find their way into the overstocked clerical market; a fact to be deplored from both the individual and national standpoint.<sup>7</sup>

As a result, the article argued there were thousands of clerks earning 25s to 30s per week, many of whom who did not even know the rudiments of book-keeping. These arguments were being perpetuated over eighty years later. Geoffrey Crossick, for example, argued in 1977 in his introductory essay in a collection of essays on the Lower Middle Class that, 'Female labour was almost certainly less of a threat to clerks than oversupply in their own ranks.'<sup>8</sup>

If the above argument was true, one would expect clerical incomes to be falling in London. Educational reform there in the latter half of the nineteenth century affected the capital equally as much as other parts of the country. In addition, one could argue that the switch from an industrial to a service economy was more marked in the Metropolis. Even though London remained the largest industrial centre in Britain, it continued throughout this period to loose manufacturing capacity to the north of England where wages were cheaper and raw materials more accessible. In the mid-nineteenth century shipbuilding and heavy engineering, for example, were just two more industrial sectors to vacate the capital.<sup>9</sup> Much of this shortfall, as has been seen

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., February, p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Crossick, 'The Emergence of the Lower Middle Class in Britain: A Discussion' in G. Crossick (ed.), The Lower Middle Class in Britain, (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1977), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Francis Sheppard, London A History, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 232.

in Michie's analysis of the City of London, was made up by expansions in the service industry, a major component of which was office work.

The question of whether there is any actual evidence that salaries were falling will first be looked at. Four companies were located which had continuous series of salaries for long time frames over the period studied. In all cases the averages were calculated from figures in salary books of the companies concerned. These were the Prudential Life Assurance Company, The London and County Bank Head Office, Heseltine Powell and Co. Stockbrokers and The Lambeth Water Works Company. None of these companies had explicit pay scales, but all had an incremental system whereby employees' salaries increased by around £10 a year up to a maximum figure, for most, of between £200 and £300. In terms of recruitment, recommendations from individuals connected with the firm were required for both the Prudential and The London and County Bank. In relation to the latter an entrance examination also had to be passed. There is no information available for the other two companies, but it is highly likely that recommendations were also required. George Rose, for instance, required one from his former employer (who was related to one of the directors of the company concerned – see Chapter VI) to gain employment at the Commercial Gas Company.<sup>10</sup> There is no reason to assume that this was not the case for The Lambeth Water Works Company, nor for a City firm such as Heseltine Powell and Co.<sup>11</sup> It must also be emphasised that in all companies, as was common practice for this period, level of income did not depend on age but rather on length of service in the company, or seniority as it was then known. This is clearly illustrated in Appendix II where a breakdown of these averages are given. Where seniority of staff was

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<sup>10</sup> Essex Records Office D/DU4/8/1, 'The Diaries of George Rose', December – January, 1900-1.

<sup>11</sup> For the importance of contacts in obtaining good clerical positions see Business Life, June, 1904, p. 280.



signified, in the cases of The Prudential and The London and County, there is a clear correlation between length of service and level of income. Promotional details were not given, however, it was standard practice for firms to take seniority strongly into consideration when moving employees up the company.

In relation to the figures, in the case of the Prudential the years 1871 and 1880 are for the Industrial Branch, which offered life insurance to the working classes and was by far the largest branch of the company. That for 1894 is for the whole company. In the case of The London and County Bank the first eight (and highest) salaries in the salary ledgers were not included as these were those of the senior offices such as the managers, secretary and accountant and would therefore have distorted the results. When calculating average salaries by seniority (see Appendix II) these eight were included, as the vast majority had been recruited from clerks who had worked their way up the ranks. The results can be seen as follows:

**Clerical Average Salaries (£) to the nearest decimal point.**

**Table 1.1**

**The Prudential Assurance Company<sup>12</sup>**

<b>1871</b>	<b>66.1</b>
<b>1880</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>1894</b>	<b>175.4</b>

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<sup>12</sup> Archives of Prudential Plc, MS-1278, 'Register of Clerks, 1885-1909', and MS-1264, 'Industrial Branch, Managers Register of Clerks, 1858-79'.

**Table 1.2**

**The London and County Bank Head Office<sup>13</sup>**

<b>1870</b>	<b>128.2</b>
<b>1880</b>	<b>162.8</b>
<b>1890</b>	<b>184.1</b>
<b>1900</b>	<b>190.7</b>
<b>1909</b>	<b>182.4</b>

**Table 1.3**

**Heseltine Powell and Co., Stockbrokers<sup>14</sup>**

<b>1874</b>	<b>171.5</b>
<b>1880</b>	<b>198.6</b>
<b>1890</b>	<b>242.2</b>
<b>1900</b>	<b>235.8</b>
<b>1905</b>	<b>238.9</b>

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<sup>13</sup> The Royal Bank of Scotland Archives GB 1502/WES/125/1-11, 'London and County Bank Clerks Registers, 1870-1909'

<sup>14</sup> London Guildhall Archives, MS-23,260, 'Heseltine, Powell & Co, Salary and Bonus Payments, 1876-1929'.

**Table 1.4**

**The Lambeth Water Works Company<sup>15</sup>**

<b>1872</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>1880</b>	<b>103.3</b>
<b>1890</b>	<b>138.1</b>
<b>1900</b>	<b>155</b>

Before any comment is made on these figures it must be emphasised that they are not meant to be seen as representative of clerical salaries in London. Bank and Insurance clerks were among the highest paid groups in the clerical profession, as were Stock Brokers' clerks in the City.<sup>16</sup> The incomes of the first three companies therefore represent the upper end of the clerical income scale. These figures are nonetheless important because if the clerical labour market were overstocked by an uncontrolled influx of individuals competing for work in the London clerical market there would have been a fall in salaries across the board. The figures in the above samples consequently tell us something about what is happening to clerical salaries in London overall in this period.

The next question is how representative were these averages for employees of these firms. Is the average distorted by an unequal distribution of incomes throughout the

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<sup>15</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, ACC/2558/LA/03, 'Lambeth Waterworks Company, salary records, 1982-1904'.

<sup>16</sup> See G. Crossick, 'The Emergence of the Lower Middle Class in Britain', p. 18.

company? Are the increases in salaries over time a result of more senior employees in the samples being given high pay increases rather than due to general pay rises for all. The statistical break-down of these figures in Appendix II suggests that these averages are to some degree meaningful and thus demonstrative. In relation to the average and median levels of income in Tables I - IV, there are constant similar figures in all four companies over the periods analysed. In relation to distribution of incomes, calculations for Standard Deviation show that while deviation, and thus distribution, do increase in all cases, this is closely correlated to increases in the size of the samples. As levels of income in these samples are symmetrical, i.e. they are roughly equal either side of the average, this would indicate that income was becoming more distributed in the companies as they grew due to an increase in employees and thus salary levels, but not more unequal in terms of distribution. The fact that Standard Deviation tends to stabilise as overall increases in employee numbers becomes less dramatic further suggests this. Finally, the breakdown of the figures for The Prudential and The London and County Bank in Table V, in terms of Average Income per Quartile by Seniority, clearly shows that all groups in these two firms benefited from the increases in salary.

In addition, there was no change in terms of real earnings. Britain experienced deflation between the 1870s and mid 1890s (during the so-called 'Great Depression'), and from 1896 onwards underwent a period of inflation. The statistician and economist A.L. Bowley, for example, estimated that at 1914 prices the cost of living index was 102 for 1880-4, 89 for 1885-9, 88 for 1890-4, 85 for 1895-9, 91 for 1900-4,

93 for 1905-9 and 99 for 1910-14.<sup>17</sup> Of course the argument was relative, for a clerk who began earning after 1900 the price rises were real, for one in work before this date they were not so serious. This point will be examined in more detail later.

From the above statistics, salaries thus appear to have been going up, and not down, as has generally been held. All companies registered rises of around 50% with even larger increases at the Prudential. These increases in salary are interesting for two other reasons. The first is that all of these companies were expanding in terms of staff over this period. Since junior clerks would have started off on small salaries which would have increased over time with increments, one would have expected a dip in salaries with an increase latter on. In the case of the above sample this clearly did not happen. Salaries appear to have increased sharply between 1870 and 1890 and then began to stabilise. The second relates to changes in price indexes over the period. If there was any correlation between the salaries in the sample and prices one would again have expected to have seen falls or at least stagnation in salaries until the mid-1890s with increases coming thereafter. The opposite appears to be the case. What we in fact see is an increase in salaries in the 1880s and 1890s being made stronger in real terms by a fall in prices, with a falling off in this rise latter on.

There are, however, two caveats to this which should be taken into consideration. The first is that while salaries may have been rising in these firms, in secondary clerical labour markets across London office pay may have been stagnating or even decreasing. The reference in The Clerk, referred to earlier, of office workers earning 25s to 30s a week was certainly a reality for some. At Cadby Hall, the headquarters of

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<sup>17</sup> A.L. Bowley, Wages and Income in the United Kingdom Since 1860, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937), p. 31.

the café and confectionary chain Lyons, for example, the salaries of the fifty five wage clerks in 1895 ranged between only 4.5 to 40 shillings a week, averaged 21.5 shillings, and had a median level of 22, less than an average workman. By 1898 this relatively low pay had deteriorated even further, with sixty wage clerks earning between 6 and 55 shillings a week, averaging 17 shillings and having a median level of only ten shillings.<sup>18</sup> These clerks would only have represented a section of the office staff of Lyons, the salaried employers earning much better incomes. Their existence, however, reminds us that there were clerks in London in the secondary sector receiving comparatively low pay. Much of the discussion of the demise of the clerk, found in journals and newspapers in this period, may have been concerned with these office workers. One could have had the scenario of an improvement in working conditions and incomes of clerks in primary labour markets at the expense of their colleagues working in secondary markets.

In addition, inflation which followed the turn of the century, did hit clerical workers hard. Since their salaries were yearly, and were often restricted to some form of salary scale, clerical income lacked the flexibility of their manual peers which made them less able to react to increases in prices. Clerical unions and associations were highly sensitive to price rises and protested strongly at the failure of employers to increase clerical salaries.<sup>19</sup> For clerks entering the labour market following 1900 the effects of inflation would have appeared more pernicious as they would not have benefited from the fall in prices in the twenty years before this. In the 1920s, for example, the Bank Officers Guild, the trade union of bank clerks, argued that while the inflation of the

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<sup>18</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, ACC/3527/179, 'Lyons, Wages Ledger (includes wages for Cadby Hall clerks and Olympia Clerks), 1895-1901'

<sup>19</sup> See Railway Clerks Association, *The Life of a Railway Clerk, Some Interesting Facts and Figures*, (London: Railway Clerks Association, 1911), p. 2. See also *Red Tape*, July, 1912, p. 16. and February, 1913, p. 69.

First World War and the Post-War period was unprecedented, it was something which had been adversely affecting bank clerks, and by association other clerical workers, since 1900.<sup>20</sup>

While these qualifications must be taken into account, there is also evidence which suggests that they should not be exaggerated. Samuel Cohn's research, for example, has found a doubling in earnings for clerks of both sexes in the Great Western Railway and the Post Office between 1870 and 1930.<sup>21</sup> These were two of the largest clerical employers in Britain, a large part of whose workforce were in secondary labour positions. Cohn found no sign of income falls amongst this group. Similarly David Lockwood's research on clerical workers in the 1950s found that until 1939 the pay differentials between white collar and blue collar workers held.<sup>22</sup> Average salaries paid to employees at the General Hydraulic Power Company based in London, many of whom were clerical workers, increased from £84.7 in 1890 to £115 in 1900 to 1910 in £151.<sup>23</sup> Pay scales for clerical workers in the Second Division of the Civil Service were increased over this period, as were, under pressure from the Railway Clerks Association, scales among the railway companies.<sup>24</sup> The increases in the Civil Service are extremely important as conditions there generally set the trend for other employers of clerical labour.

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<sup>20</sup> See 'Cost of Living', The Bank Officer, May, 1920, p. 7. The author of the article presents inflation as taking place from 1898, though this is based on wholesale rather than retail prices.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Cohn, The Process of Occupational Sex-Typing The Feminization of Clerical Labor in Great Britain, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), pp. 73-76.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Attewell, 'The Clerk Deskilled', Journal of Historical Sociology, December 1989, p. 375.

<sup>23</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, B/GH/LH/05/03-05, 'General Hydraulic Power Company Salaries Books 1887-1917'.

<sup>24</sup> See Fourth Report of the Royal Commission on the Civil Service, 1914 Cd 7338 Vol. XVI and extract from observations on the staff memorial of 1914 for increased salaries at the Great Western Railway, National Archives RAIL 258/404, 'Great Western Secretarial Papers'.

The evidence, therefore, suggests a more complex picture in London than has been previously portrayed. Inflation following 1900 put stress on clerical workers. Some secondary labour clerks, such as those at Lyons and the Assistant Clerks at the Civil Service, may have been financially under strain. Yet the limited evidence from the above salary tables present a different picture of salary increases, which have in turn been noted by other commentators and reflected in other sectors. It would thus appear that while some sectors in the clerical workforce in London were under financial strain, particularly after 1900, overall, clerical salaries in London were increasing and not decreasing in the overall period. In none of the diaries or interviews of clerks, for example, is the opinion expressed that salaries were going down or being driven down by too many clerks competing for too few places. This failure to find strong evidence of uniform falls in clerical incomes consequently undermines the argument that the clerical sector was overstocked. If the latter were the case, this would be reflected in trends in office pay.

### **Career Opportunities**

The argument that the clerical market was overstocked found another outlet in the claim that the increase in clerical numbers was stifling the opportunity for advancement. An article in The Clerk, for example, in February 1908 on 'The Clerk and Trade Unionism' argued that

The small office now gives place to the great bureaux of such limited liability companies and trusts, and the two or three clerks of the office of the past are replaced by small armies of men and women for the matter, who, are pretty



much like teeth in a great administrative machine. Concentration of this character has led to differentiation of function with the result that each individual clerk tends to become specialised on one operation, and the possibility of getting into his fingers all the operations of the office are remote. Such being the case, that very fact alone suffices to fix the clerk permanently in one particular groove.<sup>25</sup>

The flip side of the down turn in salaries was therefore the drying up of promotional opportunities. There were too many clerks scrambling for too few places. Equally harmful was the fact that with that within private companies, the increase in numbers meant that the clerical dream of becoming, after years of faithful service, a partner in the firm was becoming increasingly unobtainable. According to Anderson, for example, 'Although most clerks continued in their loyal support of employers, they now received few of the traditional rewards – partnerships or chances of economic independence.'<sup>26</sup> Overstocking was, indeed, doubly pernicious for the unfortunate clerical worker; not only did he suffer financially, but his dream of advancement via the hegemonic Victorian and Edwardian ideology of 'self improvement' was steadily coming to nought.

Again, the evidence suggests that this was not the case. In relation to promotion there is little to suggest that talented clerks were not being promoted to higher positions. Companies in this period still continued overwhelmingly to recruit internally rather than look outside for individuals to fill vacant positions. Equally important, this argument overlooks the simple fact that with increase in scale came an increase in

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., February, p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> Anderson, *Victorian Clerks*, pp. 131-2.

positions of responsibility. There were more sections to be in charge of, more ledgers to be responsible for, more departments to supervise, more bank branches to manage. Evidence from the L.C.C., the railway companies and the London County and Westminster Bank all show that there was no abatement in the pace of promotion of employees. Just as important, senior positions in all these companies and organisations continued to be filled from below. These will now be looked at in turn.

At the L.C.C., as the council took on more powers, more responsible positions became available for its officers. This point was succinctly made by an article in The L.C.C. Staff Gazette comparing the council in 1906 to forty years earlier,

...There is one thing for which, I consider, the present generation of officials has much cause to be thankful. In the days to which I have referred, the opportunities of showing one's gist were very few, the work being so limited; now, however, with the duties conferred upon the council ever widening, the astute man, with a little good fortune, may hope to reach a position not dreamed of by those who were my early confreres.<sup>27</sup>

Following the practice of the Metropolitan Board of Works, officials in the council were graded into four classes. Graduation from four to two was usually automatic, with graduation to the first contingent on a position being available. Following 1909 the system was reduced to a second class divided into sections, and a first class, entrance to the latter based again on availability of position. Above the first class and below the heads of departments were a number of unclassified positions which carried

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<sup>27</sup> L.C.C. Staff Gazette, April, 1906, p.46.

higher salaries and more responsibilities. These posts were filled internally. A report by the General Purpose Committee, one of whose responsibilities was the supervision of staff structure, clearly outlined the L.C.C.'s promotional procedure to these positions in 1908, 'The scheme provided that a vacancy in the lower section of the superior posts should, in the absence of special circumstances, be filled by the promotion of the most deserving official in the first class on the recommendation of the head of the department, through the Clerk of the Council, through to the Establishment Committee.'<sup>28</sup> The system was recommended as, '...it is noted that in order to attract and maintain in the council's service...men fitted...to the higher positions in the service...it is necessary to hold to entrants...a prospect of rising to such positions.'<sup>29</sup>

This system was also used, in most cases, to fill the most senior positions of head of departments. Vacancies when they became open, apart from those of a technical character, were usually filled internally. Sir Harry Howard, former Comptroller of the council for forty years wrote in his recollections of the council,

...The London County Council, on the whole, favoured the principle of appointment by promotion from its staff, e.g., two-thirds of the present chief officers were so appointed, but not necessarily without prior advertisement of the vacancy. Broadly every junior, outside those in certain strictly professional departments, who entered the service of the council, might be said to 'carry in

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<sup>28</sup>London Metropolitan Archives, 18.6 Minutes of Proceedings, 15 December, 1908, 'General Purpose Committee Report', p. 1340.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 1341.

his knapsack the field-marshal's baton. It was certainly so in my own case, though I never dreamed of it.<sup>30</sup>

Howard was in fact offered the position of Comptroller to the council when it became vacant in 1893, despite being in his own words, only a junior officer, twelfth down on the list, and earning £260 a year.<sup>31</sup> What is equally interesting was that this process accelerated with time. Earlier in its history, as the former Comptroller of the L.C.C. noted, the council was forced to fill certain posts from the outside as it lacked the experienced staff. Gradually, however, staff were encouraged to apply with ultimately many posts being filled from inside. 'No rule was laid down,' Howard observed, 'but there was a judicious blending of the two methods [internal and external appointments] according to the circumstances of each case. The effect upon the staff was most encouraging and salutary.'<sup>32</sup> By 1902, for example, The L.C.C. Staff Gazette noted that nine out of the sixteen chief officers of the L.C.C. were under fifty years of age, and of these five had entered the service as juniors. With evident satisfaction the article noted, 'It looks as if ability rather than seniority wins the prizes at Spring Gardens.'<sup>33</sup>

The railway companies appear to have been as equally concerned as the L.C.C. to fill senior positions internally. A valuable insight into this belief is provided by a series of letters sent in November 1900 to G.K. Mills, the then Secretary of the Great Western Railway, from a number of heads of department in answer to his suggestion of attempting to attract into the service as a special class university graduates for gradual

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<sup>30</sup> Sir Harry Howard, The London County Council from Within. Forty Years' Official Recollections, (London: Chapman and Hall Ltd, 1932), p. 66.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 68.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 66.

<sup>33</sup> The L.C.C. Staff Gazette, February, 1902, p. 14.

appointment to senior positions. All of the replies strongly rejected this tentative attempt at external appointment for senior positions, clearly based on the current mode of recruitment into the First Division of the Civil Service. While reflecting a common British commercial distrust of academic qualifications, and universities in general, what is most interesting is that all of the letters rejected the proposal on the grounds that it would unfairly disqualify existing staff from promotion to senior appointments when they became available. The Head of the Audit Department, for example, stated,

The plan suggested, if carried out, would I fear create considerable difficulties in regulating the promotion of the Junior Staff, and might be the means of prejudicing the interest of the Company by depriving them of the services of many promising youths.

We have not hitherto experienced any difficulty in filling up vacancies in this Department with fully qualified clerks from our own Staff, who have been able efficiently to protect the interests of the Company; and, I do not think the system of classes, adopted by the Civil Service, would be attended with advantage to the Service of this Company.<sup>34</sup>

Here can be clearly seen the argument, already evidenced in the case of the L.C.C., that it was in the best interests of the company to maintain a system of

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<sup>34</sup> National Archives RAIL 258/400, 'Great Western Railway Clerical Staff: recruiting, examination of, 1877-1914', Letter to G.K. Mills from Head of Audit Department, 20<sup>th</sup> November 1900.

internal promotion as it encouraged strong candidates to apply for employment from an early age. In addition, a further argument was put forward that such a system of appointment was beneficial for the company as it encouraged company loyalty.

Another head, A.W. Solten, was even more graphic in his grounds for rejection, giving in the process a penetrating insight into the recruitment and promotional system of the administration of the GWR,

Hitherto the practice has been to draw from the general staff to fill such positions, the men who, by their ability, zeal, and assiduity, have singled themselves out for promotion outside the ordinary routine, and to whom the knowledge that the prizes of the service are open to all, has been an incentive to cultivate the good qualities they possess.

The successful management and administration of a Railway depend very largely on the zealous and capable discharge, by a contented staff, of duties, some of mere detail and routine, others involving in a greater or lesser degree the exercise of thought and judgement. To introduce into the service, however delicately, the mere suspicion that the chief positions are likely to be monopolised by a favoured few individuals, thereby arresting the natural flow of promotion throughout the service, would I feel convinced, cause a feeling of discontent which would operate to the detriment of the Company by reason of the removal to excel, which, under existing circumstances, tends to their

benefit; and would also lead to the better men, who might leave the service for appointments outside such as would not otherwise attract them.<sup>35</sup>

Here we have clear evidence of a system of internal recruitment by merit to the highest positions in one of the largest companies at the time in the U.K. Recruiting from inside the company not only attracted the best men to the railways but kept them there, and in the process was mutually beneficial to both the company and employee. Under such a barrage of protest it is not surprising that Mills shelved his plan.<sup>36</sup>

Such a system of internal recruitment can be seen in the retirement of Mr Robert Powley Ellis from the Great Eastern Railway, as Superintendent of the Line in 1911. The Superintendent was responsible for the overall running of the railway and was the most senior position on the railway next to the General Manager. Ellis had joined the Eastern Counties Railway, the founding body of the G.E.R., in 1856 as a junior clerk at Ipswich. He returned to Ipswich as Goods Agent, the equivalent of Station Master on the goods as opposed to passenger side of the railway, after nearly twenty years of gaining experience in various other places in the company. In 1878 he was appointed Out-door Assistant to the Goods Manager, at a later period became District Goods Manager at Norwich, was next appointed District Goods Manager in London, and following this, Assistant Superintendent of the line before he ultimately became the chief.<sup>37</sup> Ellis was replaced by F.G. Randall, the London District Superintendent, who like his former boss had worked his way up the system, starting off also at Ipswich in 1869. Randall in turn was replaced as London District Superintendent by Mr. George Keary, the Station Master of Liverpool Street, who had entered the service as a lad

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. See letter from A.W. Solten to G.K. Mills, 14<sup>th</sup> November, 1900.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. See 'Supplementary Memorandum Clerical Staff', 1900.

<sup>37</sup> Great Eastern Railway Magazine, January 1911, p. 25.

clerk in Ongar in 1873.<sup>38</sup> The career history of all these men, and the new station master at Liverpool Street, Mr. M. Bedford, showed gradual promotion throughout the various stages of the company.

Finally in relation to the London County and Westminster bank, and its two component parts, the London and Westminster, and the London and County who merged in 1909, a similar system of internal recruitment can be evidenced. An examination of the Special Officers, ranging from Joint Manager to Chief Clerk, at the London and Westminster Bank Headquarters at Lothbury between 1906 and 1912 shows that out of the 28 details of the 29 officers given, the average age on entry was 19 years and the most common age, for ten of the officers, eighteen years. The age span of these officers on entry to the bank was between 16 and 22. It would, therefore, appear that all of these senior officers entered the bank at an early ages and worked their way up. Alfred M. Hawthorn, for example, one of the Joint Managers, joined the bank in 1865 as a junior, aged 17. He became Joint Manager 23 years later. Similarly, Arthur Harding, the Deputy Manager, joined the bank in 1868, aged 21, and became Deputy Manager in 1897.<sup>39</sup>

These findings are confirmed in The County Magazine, the journal of the London and County Bank, and from 1909 of the London County and Westminster Bank, founded in 1907 by the staff of the former. In its first edition the magazine announced the retirement of a Mr. G.J. Rodolph, who left the service of the bank on the 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1906. Rodolph had served forty-five years at the London and County, he had been many years in the Corresponding Office, for a few years Manager at the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. pp. 26-7.

<sup>39</sup> The Royal Bank of Scotland Group Archives GB 1502/LWB/22/2, 'London and Westminster Bank Staff Register, 1897-1919'



Westminster Branch, Deputy Manager at Head Office from 1897 to December, 1904, and then Manager for two years.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, the promotion of J.B. Attfield from the Head Office Manager's Department to the position of Assistant Manager at Foreign Exchange in the latter half of 1912, set off a stream of promotions in which A.P. Milsted, the Chief Clerk at Head Office moved into Attfield's old position, and A.G. Pike, of the Country Manager's Department, was elevated to Chief Clerk.<sup>41</sup> All promotions to branch managers and inspectors appears to have been done internally. As The County Magazine wrote in its first edition, '...leaving aside the Field-Marshal's baton out of the reckoning, each of us has a distinct chance of commanding a regiment; promotion from the ranks is the rule, and not the exception in our army.'<sup>42</sup>

It was not only in these large scale institutions that promotion within the ranks was the norm. Arthur Whitlock worked his way up to being in charge of the Policy Department covering goods from Argentina in the Marine Insurance company he worked for, and probably would have gone further if he had not left for the War Office in 1914. Moseley was confident of getting somewhere in Waterlows and had in fact already been promoted in 1906. By 1908, he was no longer calling out his hated repositories and was working solely on accountancy work. Similarly George Rose, who had worked for the Commercial Gas Company in Stepney since 1901, had by 1913 been promoted to Assistant Cashier. His friend Edwin had done even better, in 1906 he was made assistant to one of the Heads.<sup>43</sup> On October 19<sup>th</sup> William Evans, who worked for the City Lawyers Ashurst Morris Smith & Co, was transferred to the

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<sup>40</sup> The County Magazine, No. 1, 1907, p. 70.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. No. 4, p. 216.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, No.1, p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> Essex Records Office, D/DU 4/8/1, 'Diaries of George Rose', December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1906, September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1913.

Cashiers Department where he was to assist the head, Mr Botwright.<sup>44</sup> In all cases these were individuals who were moving up the company, and as with the larger firms the basic criterion was the same, it attracted good staff and motivated them, and encouraged company loyalty.

### **The Dream of Independence**

What of the argument that with the growth of large scale complex companies, and the influx in large numbers of new recruits, clerks were no longer able to realise the cherished goal of being made a partner? In many respects the argument is a highly dubious one, and should be treated as such for several reasons. There is no real evidence that in the 'golden age of clerkdom' before capitalism took a spiteful turn, there was a realistic chance of a clerk being made a partner. As Anderson, who has argued on this point, admits himself, it was only those clerks from prosperous backgrounds who were ever made partners.<sup>45</sup> One should here, for example, not forget the term 'career clerk'. This denoted a professional clerk, one who would spend his working life in a clerical capacity. Such men were very different from those who were working as clerks to learn the ropes of a business, after which they would go onto higher positions, or those who were working temporarily as clerks before they went onto other things. The chances of the former type of clerk being made a partner were small. It should also be remembered that in terms of company structure the partnership model was not devised to reward, but rather to bring capital into

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<sup>44</sup> London borough of Hackney Archives, DS/EVA/1-3, 'William Evan's Diaries', October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1891.

<sup>45</sup> Gregory Anderson, 'The Social Economy of Late-Victorian Clerks', in Geoffrey Crossick (ed.), The Lower Middle Class in Britain, p. 117.

companies.<sup>46</sup> It was only those who had sufficient material means who would be made partners in all but the smallest of companies, and it is unlikely that any clerk, unless they were from an affluent background, would be able to do so.

Secondly, for many London clerks, especially in the City, companies remained small. While as Anderson argues many of the middle men of the pre-1870 world were cut out by the technological revolutions of the later period, these were simply replaced by new individuals who fostered this technology.<sup>47</sup> Why should, therefore, one of the five clerks who worked for the private City firm of Messers Gillett Brothers, bill brokers and money dealers, have had any less chance of being made a partner in 1910 than he would have had fifty years earlier?<sup>48</sup> Finally, in relation to the argument that as companies grew bigger doors were increasingly shut to clerks, it was precisely in those firms that were becoming joint-stock companies and growing in scale, such as banks and breweries, that clerks earlier stood less chance of becoming a partner because of their great need for capital which no employee would have been able to furnish.

One other means of becoming independent for a clerk was setting up on their own. There is no sign that entry threshold levels were being made more difficult in the period of this study than earlier. In fact the opposite could be the case, with more and more businesses being attracted, for example, to the City, both from around Britain and from abroad. With a more developed finance system and with many companies remaining small, one would have imagined that opportunities for openings were

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<sup>46</sup> See John F. Wilson, *British Business History 1720-1994*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), Chapter 2, esp. pp. 27-9.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 118.

<sup>48</sup> Guildhall library, MS-24698, 'Messers Gillett Brothers, Staff, 1898, 1902 and 1949'

becoming greater, not smaller. After building up experience, contacts and capital, many City clerks, who were prepared to take the risk, did try and set up on their own as agents, dealers or brokers. On November 1904, for example, new rules were introduced to restrict membership of the Stock Exchange. A fortnight before the rules were actually implemented some 664 clerks took advantage of the breathing space to become members under the old, less expensive system<sup>49</sup> It was furthermore not only in commerce or finance that clerks were able to set up. Elsie Barralet's husband, for example, worked as a clerk for the City piano manufacturers, Murdock's, but refused to return to the company after the First World War because they would only pay him the wages that he was on before he signed up. Instead he went to work as a manager, doing clerical work, for his uncle who had a builders merchants along the Lea Bridge Road. After a while he branched off and set up his own business manufacturing fireplaces.<sup>50</sup>

It would, therefore, appear that the argument that promotional opportunities were diminishing in this period is unfounded. Company policy whether large or small, was internal promotion from the ranks. From the lowest to increasingly the highest posts, positions were filled by those already in the company. Evidence from the L.C.C, the railways and the London County and Westminster Bank, in addition to individuals such as Arthur Whitlock and George Rose show this clearly was the case. At the same time, as companies grew in scale the number of responsible positions within these firms showed a corresponding increase. J.F. Davis made precisely this point in his work on British Banks,

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<sup>49</sup> David Kynaston, *The City of London Volume II Golden Years*, (London: Pimlico, 1995), p. 400.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Thompson and Thea Vigne's Interviews on Family Life and Work Experience before 1918, University of Essex, Elsie Barralet.

...the ambition of most banking men is to be manager of a branch...Where new branches are opened every year, new managers are necessarily appointed, and the proportion of managers to the whole staff is increased, or at any rate it is prevented from diminishing. In a Bank of 100 branches and a staff of 700 apart from the managers, the proportion of managers to the rest of the staff would be one to seven. If the Bank opened five new branches every year for five years, and appointed a manager and two clerks to each branch, there would be at the end of the period 125 managers, and the rest of the staff would be 750. The proportion of managers to the rest of the staff is then one to six.<sup>51</sup>

It is in this respect that Anderson is not entirely right when he points out that in 1840 there were only forty-eight staff at the London based insurance company he refers to in his essay on clerks, and six departments, while in 1914 there were three hundred and fourteen staff in eight departments, and then calculates that the chances of promotion for these staff had correspondingly plummeted.<sup>52</sup> With the increase in staff came growth not only in departments but also in sections in these departments. These would have had senior positions available to clerks from the ranks. At the Prudential, for example, the Claim Department was split up into four divisions on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1879. These were the A.B.C. division under G. Hooper, the D.E.F. division under A. Marshall, the G.H.I. division under M. Smith, and the J.K.L.M. Division under W.E. Craig. The J.K.L.M. division was subsequently split into two divisions on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1885, the I.K. division under W.E. Martin, and the L.M. division under W.E. Craig and this was further split into the L division under W.E. Craig and the M

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<sup>51</sup> J.F. Davis, Bank Organisation, Management and Accounts, (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1910), p. 27.

<sup>52</sup> Gregory Anderson, 'The Social Economy of Late-Victorian Clerks', in Geoffrey Crossick (ed.), The Lower Middle class in Britain 1870-1914, (London: Croom Helm, 1977), p. 115.

division under R.L. Baker on the 26<sup>th</sup> February, 1894. As the Claim Department divided and sub-divided, clerks were able to move up into posts of authority within these sections. There is no reason to doubt that what was happening in the banks and the insurance sector was not happening in other concerns. With growth in business, as there clearly was in London, whether in the City, the banking sector, the railways or government, came a growth in promotion opportunities for its employees.

### **Job Security and Clerical Unemployment**

Finally, in relation to job security, there is little evidence for the claim that clerks positions were becoming more insecure.<sup>53</sup> Anderson is right to look at employment exchanges to investigate the extent of clerical unemployment. His pointing, however, to a report in the Daily News, that in excess of 13,000 clerks and others had looked for work at the employment bureau at Exeter Hall in 1891, the headquarters of the London YMCA, was evidence of widespread unemployment, is a little naïve. Newspaper statistics and figures must be treated with the greatest suspicion.<sup>54</sup> This point was clearly made in an article in 1911 in The Railway Clerk, concerning the fantastical salaries and terms and conditions of railway employment which bore no relation to the true state of affairs that had been reported in daily newspapers.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, the figure refers to clerks *and others*. The YMCA was not in this period an organisation comprised of clerical workers, it was an association made up of young Christian men, a large proportion of whom were clerks, but not all. Finally, enquiring about employment, and registering as being unemployed, as 617 individuals did in that year, were evidently two different things. Evidence shows that young clerks,

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p. 119.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p. 122.

<sup>55</sup> The Railway Clerk, January 1911, pp. 3-5.

while in employment, were continually looking out for other positions. Alfred Moseley wrote off for a job in the U.S., and went for an interview as a chief clerk at a meat merchants where he was creative with the truth about the extent of his responsibilities at Waterlow's.<sup>56</sup> George Rose went to enquire in 1906 about a position as a clerk in a music shop<sup>57</sup>, and Arthur Whitlock was considering working for another Marine Insurance firm in 1914 before he went to work for the War Office.<sup>58</sup> The clerical labour market in this period was not static, particularly for young clerks who were ever on the look out for better paid positions or those with more opportunities for promotion. One grievance of some London clerks, for example, was that those who worked for companies who were members of the London Chamber of Commerce could not put their names down on the roll of its employment bureau without first asking for the permission of their employers.<sup>59</sup> Clerks were clearly looking for work while they were still in employment.

Working out the level of unemployment of clerks in London is difficult, and no more than a rough impression can be expected. As Anderson has argued, because clerks did not resort to the traditional bodies of relief during periods of unemployment and deprivation such as the Poor Laws, charities, and trade union bodies, one of the best areas to look at are the unemployment exchanges that were springing up around London.<sup>60</sup> In October 1904 the London Unemployed Fund was established to alleviate the effects of unemployment. In 1905 the Central Unemployment Body for London was established under the Unemployed Workmen Act of 1905. Neither body, however, tell us anything about clerical unemployment. One group of statistics that

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<sup>56</sup> *The Private Diaries of Sydney Moseley*, p. 35 & p. 42.

<sup>57</sup> 'Diary of George Rose', November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1906.

<sup>58</sup> British Library, *Millennium Memory Bank*, C900/07507 'Arthur Whitlock'.

<sup>59</sup> *The Clerk*, April, 1908, p. 41.

<sup>60</sup> Anderson, *Victorian Clerks*, p. 120.

can give us some idea are figures provided by the labour exchange in the London Vestry/Borough of Battersea between 1894 and 1900. Battersea itself contained a relatively large number of clerks. The 1901 census returns for the borough for example state that out of 52, 313 men engaged in occupations 3,492 were commercial clerks, 503 were law clerks and 568 worked in money and insurance (e.g. bank and insurance clerks).<sup>61</sup> If one adds an extra 1, 000 government, post office and railway clerks (which is a conservative estimate), one arrives at around 5,500 clerks, around 10.5% of the total male working population, which is about the average for London. The extent of clerical unemployment can be seen below.<sup>62</sup>

**Table 1.5**

**Number of Clerks Registered as Unemployed in Battersea, 1894-1900**

<b>Year</b>	<b>1894</b>	<b>1895</b>	<b>1896</b>	<b>1897</b>	<b>1898</b>	<b>1899</b>	<b>1900</b>
<b>No. of Clerks Registered as unemployed</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Total Registered as Unemployed</b>	<b>2,361</b>	<b>3,200</b>	<b>2,525</b>	<b>1,340</b>	<b>1,739</b>	<b>1,383</b>	<b>1,075</b>

<sup>61</sup> Census Report for England and Wales, (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1901).

<sup>62</sup> L.C.C. Statistics 1896-7 (Vol. 7) p. xxv., 1901-02 (Vol. 12) p. xviii.



**Table 1.6**

**Percentage of Various Occupations Living in Battersea Registered as  
Unemployed at Batersea Labour Exchange 1898 (Based on 1901 Census  
Returns)**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Number Registered as Unemployed</b>	<b>Percentage of Total Registered Living in Battersea</b>
<b>Carpenters and Joiners</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>1.3</b>
<b>Bricklayers</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0.2</b>
<b>Painters and Paper Hangers</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>4.4</b>
<b>Plumbers</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>1.8</b>
<b>Gas and Hot Water Fitters</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>General Labourers</b>	<b>1,206</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Carmen</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Gardeners</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2.1</b>
<b>Porters</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>8.5</b>
<b>Clerks</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>0.5</b>
<b>Compositors</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0.1</b>

Though not aiming to reflect the real extent of clerical unemployment in Battersea, these figures give us some insight into clerical unemployment. They show that the number of clerks registered as unemployed was low, its highest point in 1899 being 1%. Clerks also appear to compare favourably with other groups, with only Bricklayers and Compositors with lower percentages registered. These figures are also reflected elsewhere. Between 1893-4, for example, St. Pancras had 66 registered clerks and warehousemen, 64 were registered in Chelsea, 53 in Camberwell, 18 in Westminster and 1 in St. Giles and George.<sup>63</sup> This is hardly convincing evidence of mounting unemployment amongst clerks.

One clerical group that did suffer in this period, however, was older clerical workers. An article in The Railway Clerk in 1904, for example, spoke of, '...the out of work clerk, who is said to be too old at forty.'<sup>64</sup> Companies preferred to obtain their clerical workers relatively young. At this age they were felt to be more malleable workers who could be trained into the workings of the company. It was felt that this was more difficult to do with older men. Although older men had more experience than younger this had been gained in a different work environment, where, for example, different accounting systems were used. If a clerk was unfortunate, therefore, to lose his job in his late thirties or forties he had a difficult time in front of him. In October 1910, for example, a thirty eight year old clerk was found dead in St. Pancras. He had been out of work since June and had died from starvation. In his room there was said to be neither food, money, nor anything of value.<sup>65</sup> An article in The Ilford Guardian in 1900 on the Darkest England Social Scheme of the Salvation Army, a labour bureau

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. Vol. IV., 1893-4, p.xxiii.

<sup>64</sup> The Railway Clerk, October 1904, p. 117.

<sup>65</sup> The Clerk, November 1910, p. 168.

which mostly found unskilled work for its applicants such as wood chopping or paper sorting, spoke of the clerks who came to the scheme, 'by the dozen.'<sup>66</sup>

There were certainly clerks in London in distress. Constituting one of the largest occupational groups in the city one could hardly have expected otherwise. In particular it should be remembered that many clerks in London had migrated into the city and so had no family to support them if they fell on hard times. This point was made in the above article on the Salvation Army. Out of 169 men who had been found work sorting paper, only 69 were London born.<sup>67</sup> Older clerks suffered, so did those who were dismissed from their jobs as happened to Geoffrey Rogers' father during the First World War. Caught 'cooking the wages' at his employers Ashburt, the Bond street jewellers, he was prosecuted and received a four month sentence. Following this he never worked as a clerk again and thereafter did intermittent casual labouring work such as working on the roads for the council.<sup>68</sup>

There is, however, no strong evidence to support the view that clerks were increasingly vulnerable to unemployment. In the interviews and diaries, among not only the diarists and interviewees, but also among their friends and family members who were clerks, there are only two examples throughout the period of a clerk actually being unemployed. The first was the father of Frank David Charles Lee, who had lost his job while his son was still a baby and remained out of work, living in Dalston, for six years. His father had married young and against the wishes of his and his wife's parents. He was only 19 when his son was born. Such inauspicious

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<sup>66</sup> The Ilford Guardian, August 25th, 1900.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> British Library, Thompson and Vigne, Family Life and Work Experience before 1918, QD1/FL WE/161, 'Geoffrey Rogers', p.3 and p. 31.

circumstances would certainly have mitigated against him finding work in a period when a clerk's character and credentials were equally as important as his office skills. It was only through the help of a friend at his church that he was able to get back on his feet again, being introduced to Badger & Co., the confectioners.<sup>69</sup> The second example was the close friend and flat mate of George Rose, Duncan. On October 9<sup>th</sup>, 1913, he was told by his Stock Exchange employer that his services were required no longer.<sup>70</sup> This reference was passed off in a relatively nonchalant manner and there appeared to be no indication of disquiet or panic. Despite these two examples, however, the atmosphere that one gathers from these sources is an environment where jobs were stable and clerks were confident enough to leave their work to look for better positions. It is also in many cases one of rising affluence. This image in regards to stability of employment dovetails with the above statistics on labour exchanges in Battersea and other London boroughs.

Perhaps, however, the most telling point which contradicts the argument that clerical work was increasingly becoming vulnerable to the vicissitudes of unemployment in this period is the fact that individuals were attracted to clerical work because it offered stable employment. W.J. Brown's father's advice to his son on leaving Margate to look for work in London was to get whatever jobs he could until he was old enough to enter for a Civil Service examination and then to try for it. 'If you get into the Service', he told his son, 'you're made for life – a permanent job all your life and a pension at the end of it.'<sup>71</sup> 'That to my father', commented Brown on his father's advice, 'represented the Mecca of all earthly hopes, and indeed, I myself had seen enough of the effects of unemployment in our home to put a high value on economic

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., QD1/FLWE/183, 'Frank David Charles Lee', pp. 1-3.

<sup>70</sup> 'George Rose Diary', November 26<sup>th</sup>, 1913.

<sup>71</sup> W.J. Brown, *So Far*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1943), p. 37.

security.<sup>72</sup> It was, indeed, underemployment, having irregular employment, rather than unemployment, that was one of the greatest problems facing working people in London in the Victorian and Edwardian period. Many jobs, such as in the clothing and building trades were seasonal or highly vulnerable to swings in the market. Many individuals found themselves in the dire situation of having no work for weeks and months on end, often without any assistance. This can be seen, for example, in the labour exchange returns for Battersea. Commenting on the tailoring trade in the East End of London in 1888, one of the biggest employers in the area, Beatrice Potter estimated that, 'it would be fair to state the average work per week throughout the year as four to four and a half days in the shops of the large contractors and for the most competent and skilled hands throughout the trade; three days for medium shops and average labour; and two and a half days and under for the great majority of permanently unskilled or imperfectly trained workers.'<sup>73</sup> In 1911 one commentator wrote in relation to Jewish tailors, who at the time were among the most skilled in London, working at the bespoke end of the trade, i.e. made to order, rather than the mass produced sector,

The Jewish tailor works on an average no more than six or seven months out of the twelve months. Often he has to be in the workshop for three days to make one and a half days...when he works at full steam, his average earnings for the year are from 25s to 30s per week, for best tailors, and from 18s to 20s for second class tailors.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> David Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews, Social Relations and Political Culture, 1840-1914*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 206.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

The situation did not appear to improve with time. Simon Blumenfeld's novel, Jew Boy, for example, written in the 1930s depicts a young Jewish tailor, Alex, in the East End, afflicted by periodic bouts of overwork and long periods of unemployment.<sup>75</sup> Yet even here, Alex and others like him were lucky to have a trade, for the unskilled the situation was even worse.

Uncertainty concerning work was clearly evident in the interviews used in this research. Percival Chambers, for example, was born in 1894, moved to West Norwood in South-East London when he was eleven or twelve and went to work for Pearl Insurance when he was fourteen and a half. Concerning this move he commented, '...it was a clean job and a pensionable job'.<sup>76</sup> From the experience of his father he could also have said that it was a steady job. Chamber's father was a stone mason, a highly skilled and relatively well-paid occupation but subject to periodic bouts of unemployment. Asked whether he ever remembered his father being out of work, he answered,

Oh yes, quite a lot, quite a lot. In the days when times were very very bad, I've known him walk to London with coppers in his pocket and rather than spend them he used to walk there and walk back. And then come back without a job probably.<sup>77</sup>

There was no attempt by his father to apprentice him into his trade. Chamber's clerical position at Pearl was actually obtained for him via a friend of his fathers.

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<sup>75</sup> Simon Blumenfeld, Jew Boy, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1986)

<sup>76</sup> Thompson and Vigne's Interviews, Percival Chambers, p. 43.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

Chambers was like many boys in this period, the son of a skilled worker who wanted a more stable life for his son. New entrants into the clerical profession did not only come from clerking backgrounds but also from the sons of the petit bourgeois and from artisans. This of course raises a serious question. Why would Chamber's father want his son to be a clerk if the conditions were so bad and the work was so unsteady? Why would George Rose's father, an affluent tailor in Chipping Ongar, or Andrew Carlyle Tait's father, an individual who owned a bookshop in the City<sup>78</sup>, go out of their way to procure clerical positions for their sons if they did not think they were conferring an advantage on them? The answer here is clear. It is the same as that given by W.J. Brown's father to his son. In an age of instability, when unemployment, illness, or death could strike at any time, the importance placed on security in a job was hard to imagine. Clerical work offered in its own small way such a secure existence. Jim Hancock's father, for example, started working as a clerk at the headquarters of the London County and Westminster Bank at Lothbury in the City in 1913. He had earlier tried for the Civil Service but had failed the entrance examination. The decision for both his application to the Civil Service and the London County and Westminster had been taken by his father, a relatively well-off commercial traveller living in Stoke-Newington. Asked what was the motivating factors for this choice of careers by his grandfather, Jim, a clerk and latter branch manager himself at the same bank answered,

I think ... security was regarded as very important. Don't forget this was in the days when the welfare state such as we know it now simply didn't exist...generally each person was expected to look after their own fortune. My

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<sup>78</sup> See London Guildhall Library, MS-20383, 'Diary of Andrew Carlyle Tait, 1893-4'.

grandparents would have known that with the Civil Service and with the bank there was a pension at the end of the time, there was the respectability of the job, there was the chance of promotion and a steady job providing you didn't 'blot your copy-book', as the saying went, you would be there for life until you retired.<sup>79</sup>

## Conclusion

In the Late-Victorian and Edwardian period, the argument that clerical work was overstocked, was falling victim to declining salaries, reduced opportunities and growing unemployment in London needs to be questioned. This should be applied equally to both sectors of the clerical labour market. The overall numbers do not add up. Neither does the oral evidence, nor diaries written by clerks at the time, nor the records of companies, nor the fact that so many families, many from relatively comfortable backgrounds, were so eager to obtain clerical positions for their children. In fact the only thing that does appear to support this theory are the records of the National Union of Clerks. An organisation, one should hasten to add, whose membership stood at 163 in 1906, and in 1914, at 12,508, represented less than 2% of all the clerks in Great Britain.<sup>80</sup> Clerks did not enter the N.U.C. because they suffered from false consciousness, because they were too proud to accept the realities of their dire economic and social situation. The N.U.C. failed to attract such recruits because their image of the 'Social Economy of Late- indeed Victorian Clerks' did not reflect the reality of what, for a large majority of clerks, was actually happening.

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<sup>79</sup> Interview with Jim Hancock at his home, November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

<sup>80</sup> The Clerk, May 1914, p. 83.



While there were certainly poor clerks living in London, and while the growth of secondary labour markets referred to in the previous chapter, may have increased their numbers, the extent to which their working conditions deteriorated is open to debate. It is, however, important to note that some in this sector may have experienced falls in salaries, particularly in the inflationary period following 1900, and many, particularly those from the expanding elementary and secondary schools, may have felt they were not earning as much as they were entitled to or had hoped. Despite this, however, for many clerks in London, the period was one of modest progress. Many were earning more, had steady jobs, and were realising, in most cases, moderate levels of promotion. In a period of economic expansion, and in a city which was gaining from the growth in international trade and the benefits that this brought, such an analysis is not surprising. The image of the 'poor, suffering clerk' should, perhaps, remain where it originated, in the discourse of trade unionism and the realms of literary fiction.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> See, for example, Anon, The Story of a London Clerk. A Narrative Faithfully Told, (London: Leadenhall Press, 1896).

## Chapter III

### The Clerk, the Office and Work – Changing Horizons

What was the actual experience of work for the male clerical worker of the Late Victorian and Edwardian period? Since the 1970s, when historians and social scientists have discussed this area there has been an overwhelming tendency to follow the Braverman line of argument.<sup>1</sup> Before 1870 clerks were all round craftsmen who derived a sense of satisfaction from their work. They were relatively autonomous, skilled, responsible for the execution of important tasks within a company and consequently enjoyed relatively high status. The onset of advanced capitalism, growth in business concerns, and the application of technology and rational procedures to work changed all of this. Division of labour and specialisation transformed clerks into a demoralised white-collar proletariat. The previously close ties between the clerk and his employer were broken. Clerks became assembly workers in monstrous bureaucratic machines performing repetitive tasks, the end-goal of which they had no idea. The result was alienation and a growing sense of disorientation. As this analysis reflected the commonly held belief that office work is routine, repetitive and essentially boring much of it has remained intact. Paul Attewell's article, The Clerk Deskilled: A Study in False Nostalgia, for example, one of the first attacks on the Braverman thesis, simply confirmed this argument by claiming that there was no real

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capitalism, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), Gregory Anderson, Victorian Clerks, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), R. Guerriero, Disillusionment or New Opportunities? The Changing Nature of Work in Offices, Glasgow 1880-1914, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999)

break in the nature of clerical duties in the latter half of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> For the vast majority of clerks, before and after 1870, clerical work had always been routine, tedious and mind-numbing.

This chapter will take a closer look at the work of the male clerical worker between 1890 and 1914, and his relationship to his work. It will argue that while Braverman is correct in arguing for structural shifts in the clerks' working environment and the nature of the work carried out, this did not necessarily imply a deterioration of the work process itself. Working practices simply changed. This did not automatically result in them becoming any worse. There is, in fact, evidence that for many the experience of work actually improved.

This chapter is divided into two sections, one examining the relationship between the clerk and his employer, the other analysing the relationship between the clerk and his work. In relation to the former, there was for many a fundamental shift from a master-servant relationship to a more impersonal employer-employee relation. It is in this context that the emergence of company pensions, provident funds, canteens and sports and social facilities should be located. No longer able to maintain personal relationships with their employees, companies turned to providing social welfare and amenities to retain the loyalty of their workers. The role of sport and social clubs in companies will be discussed in detail in this section. It will also be argued that changes in pay structure changed relations. The introduction of pay scales created a more depersonalised relationship between clerks and employers as remuneration

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Attewell, 'The Clerk Deskilled: A Study in False Nostalgia', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol. 2 No. 4 December 1989.

became linked to an objective scale rather than a financial reward for services rendered between master and servant.

The second part will argue that a growing division of labour in the office should not necessarily be seen as an unfavourable development. Division of labour did not mean that clerks were stuck in one position for their entire working lives. Clerks usually passed during their careers through a number of positions, thus developing their occupational skills. For others it meant specialisation, and even semi-professionalism. Such changes resulted in a fundamental change in attitude for many towards their occupation. Work became increasingly seen as a slow but gradual progression up a series of scales. This section will also argue that as there was a loosening of bonds between the clerk and his employer, so there was also a weakening of ties between clerks and their place of employment. Clerical turnover, contrary to widespread belief, was relatively high. Finally, it will look at how the working atmosphere for clerks changed. With an increase in numbers and a more depersonalised relationship between clerks and employers a more disciplined and regimented atmosphere was established in the office. At the same time this should not be exaggerated. There is evidence which suggests that while stricter discipline may have been introduced into the office, the workplace for clerks was still relatively flexible and open.

### **The Change from Master-Servant to Employer-Employee Relations**

In 1953 Roger Fulford published a history of Glyn's Bank to mark its bicentenary. Bought by the Royal Bank of Scotland in 1939, it had remained to that date one of London's foremost private bank and was to be the last of its kind on Lombard Street.

Discussing the clerks of the bank and the changes they had experienced in the nineteenth century Fulford wrote,

...the change in the nineteenth century, so far as the staff is concerned, is not so much in salary as in their relation to the partners, and generally in the House. Mr. Ovington, in Stanley Weyman's novel...once said in reference to his clerks, 'We are all in the same boat though we may not all steer'. As the nineteenth century developed the clerks became less concerned with the progress of the boat than with the amenities of their own position inside it. The change from the old conception of the clerk as the personal servant of the partner – proud of the good name of the House and sensitive to every whisper which might effect it – to the new conception of the clerks as one of a larger staff – certainly still proud of the House but much concerned with their own conditions and rights – was an inevitable development.<sup>3</sup>

At the beginning of the nineteenth century bank clerks lived in over the bank with their masters. There was thus a close personal relationship between the two. Clerks were often sons of associates of the partners and had gained their positions via patronage. Despite such close ties, however, masters were free to hire, treat and dismiss clerks as they saw fit. There were no contractual agreements between the two, neither was there much in terms of legal or parliamentary regulation. When the clerk married often depended on the sanction of the partners. Financial aid during periods

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<sup>3</sup> Roger Fulford, Glyn's: 1753-1953, (London: Macmillan and Co Ltd, 1953), p. 168.

of illness or when they were able to work depended on their good will. Bank clerks were in effect commercial servants.<sup>4</sup>

By 1900 this situation had changed. Clerks no longer lived with the heads of banks. Only managers in the Joint-Stock banks lived over branches. While recruitment still depended on recommendation, it was also conditional on passing an entrance examination and/or holding external qualifications. On retirement most bank clerks received pensions. If forced to resign due to illness there were provident funds to protect them and their families. Contracts were now signed between clerks and the bank, agreeing terms of employment, guarantee funds had to be secured by the clerk to insure against possible future loss, a corpus of laws had evolved which partially regulated the relationship between the two.<sup>5</sup> Most partners, directors or managers would be hard pressed to name more than a fraction of their clerical workers. Clerks had effectively become employees, rather than servants, of the bank.

This change in relationships was clearly not uniform amongst all clerks. At the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank until as late as the 1970s officials had to obtain permission to 'resign' from work. Throughout this period and beyond they had no formal contract and could not marry until they had been ten years in the service of the bank.<sup>6</sup> In the smaller offices personal relations were still prevalent between owners, partners and clerks. Patronage was still essential for gaining access to many clerical positions, and pensions were unevenly distributed throughout the professions. Despite this, however, relations were clearly altering. Relationships between clerks and the

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<sup>4</sup> See Edward A. Cope, Clerks Their Rights and Obligations, (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, Ltd, 1909), p. 6. See also The County and Westminster Magazine, 1910, Vol. I, pp. 32-5.

<sup>5</sup> RBSG Archives GB 1502/LWB/113, 'London & Westminster rules and regulations, 1909'.

<sup>6</sup> Frank H.H. King, The History of the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, Vol. I, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 597.

companies they worked for were becoming gradually more formalised. Symptomatic of these changes was a book published in 1909 by Edward A. Cope entitled, Clerks Their Rights and Obligations.<sup>7</sup> Cope noted that a body of law had evolved which to some degree regulated the relationship between clerks and employers. Bankruptcy Acts gave clerks certain rights in the event of the insolvency of a company, the Workmen's Compensation Act, 1906 gave them protection from injuries incurred in the workplace, the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1906 made them liable to serious penalties in the event of committing corrupt offences. The ability of an employer to dismiss a clerk was curtailed by various judicial precedents. The work, in effect, listed the legal protection that a clerk could receive and the duties he was obliged to perform. Its very appearance was proof of the change that had taken place in the last century between clerks and their masters, and on a broader scale in the employment market in general. It is fitting that the book was published in the midst of important reforms by the Liberal governments of Asquith and later Lloyd George which were, in many respects, statutory acknowledgements of these shifts.

While such changes were beneficial to employers as a result of the greater manoeuvrability it gave them, they were also a liability. The old paternalistic master-servant relationship had earlier guaranteed the loyalty of clerical workers. As clerical workers were often directly responsible for large sums of money and handled confidential information this was vital to the well-being of most companies. With the loosening of bonds between master and servant it was increasingly feared that clerical loyalty to employer and company could not be guaranteed. Stories in the press of embezzlement by clerks in this period were common. An examination of the Clerks

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<sup>7</sup> Edward A. Cope, Clerks Their Rights and Obligations.

Register at Glyn's Bank, for example, shows that between 1890 and 1914 nine clerks were dismissed for embezzlement, robbery and fraud, or suspicion of having perpetrated such acts.<sup>8</sup> In one case in 1905, for example, Clerk G, an employee in the Town Office, was dismissed for serious irregularities, and another three were dismissed for being 'mixed-up' with Clerk G in connection with money lenders.<sup>9</sup>

In order to guard against such acts and retain the loyalty of staff one can see from the 1870s onwards amongst larger companies the development of corporate patronage. Pensions, provident funds, widow and orphan funds, profit sharing, bonuses and life insurance replaced the older system of Christmas boxes, gratuities and 'assistance'. These various benefits helped to maintain loyalty because they clearly linked the well-being of the clerk with that of the company he worked for. In addition, the amount one received depended on the length of time one worked for the organisation. Pensions, for example, in many offices were paid at the rate of one sixtieth of a clerk's final salary for every year one had served up to a maximum of two-thirds. Payments were conditional on a minimum period of service, usually ten or twenty years. It was clearly, therefore, in the interest of the clerk to remain loyal to his employer in order to maximise his pension.<sup>10</sup>

Many of these schemes first originated in the Civil Service and then spread to the banks, railway companies, local government and other large organisations. From there they filtered down to other firms. Again the development was neither uniform nor ubiquitous. Some companies persisted in the older methods, others differed in their

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<sup>8</sup> RBSG Archives GB 1502/GM/339/1, 'Glyn's Bank, Clerk's Register, 1864-1918'

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., GB 1502/GM/710/1 'Glyn's Bank Town Office Annual Reports, 1896-1911'

<sup>10</sup> See Ibid., GB 1502/LWB/113, 'London and Westminster Rules and Regulations, 1909'. For an overall discussion of the development of pensions see Leslie Hannah, Inventing Retirement: the development of occupational pensions in Britain, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986)



extent and generosity. Banks, for example, tended to cover the total expenses of pensions, while the railway companies only paid a part. In 1914 in London many clerks who worked in smaller offices would still be paying into friendly societies and life insurance schemes.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless such company assisted social insurance amongst clerks was a crucial innovation of this period and was a growing trend. They were immensely popular for the security they offered and acted as a major attraction to new recruits. As Jim Hancock has said in relation to his father, for example, it was the promise of a regular income and a pension at the end which made his parents opt for a clerical career first in the civil service, and then in a bank for their son.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Growing Importance of Sport and Social Clubs**

In addition to social insurance, there was one other innovation that larger companies and government offices introduced to try and retain the loyalty of their clerks. This was the introduction of subsidised sports and social facilities. The background to this can be located in the growth in the interest in sport and in social clubs and voluntary recreational societies, particularly amongst the middle classes, which can be seen as a defining feature of nineteenth century British social and cultural history.<sup>13</sup> The degree to which these were introduced, encouraged and supported by banks, insurance houses, railway companies, national and local government and other sectors in London cannot be exaggerated. Between November 1899 and February 1904, for example, the Great Western Railway spent £2,030 on the GWR Athletic

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<sup>11</sup> See G.S. Layard, 'A Lower Middle Class Budget', in Cornhill Magazine, 1901, Vol. 10, p. 666.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Jim Hancock at his home, November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> See R. Holt, Sport and the British: A Modern History, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), T. Mason, Sport in Britain, (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), John Lowerson, Sport and the English Middle Classes 1870-1914, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993). See also R.J. Morris, 'Clubs, Societies and Associations', in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950 Vol. 3, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990)

Association.<sup>14</sup> This money was spent on the building of a sporting club and pavilion on a 17 acre ground in West Ealing, the equipping of the club and its upkeep. The capital came from several block grants and annual donations from the board. The facilities themselves were exclusively used by the clerks of the GWR, their friends and family and were well patronised by the staff. Football, cricket, tennis, hockey, bowling and other sports were played at the grounds. Members fees were subsidised by a yearly grant of 100 guineas from the board and annual subscriptions and donations from directors and senior management. Writing to the Board of the GWR in 1910, the Secretary of the club, E.E. Davies, noted, 'It is difficult to imagine what would happen to the Athletic Association if the Directors discontinued their annual contribution of 100 guineas.' After listing the activities and benefits of the club he candidly closed by pointing out that,

The support of the Company is most certainly fully appreciated and is doing good work, not only by helping to keep the Club afloat, but because the average man will always think more kindly of an employer who takes interest in and helps to provide amusement and recreation for his leisure hours; and this is evidently the opinion of many firms such as Messers Lever Bros., Messers Cadbury Ltd., Messers Otto Monsted Ltd., and most of the large West End Business Houses, as well as various other Railway Companies.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly by 1905 both the London and Westminster and the London and County Banks had sports clubs in Norbury, South East London. In addition to this, the London and County had a rowing club and boat house, all paid for by the bank, and a

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<sup>14</sup> National Archives RAIL 258/237 'Great Western Railway (London) Athletic Association, 1900-47'

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

plethora of other social and sporting organisations. In 1911, for example, The County and Westminster Magazine, the staff journal of the now merged London and Westminster and London and County Banks listed the clubs and societies of the bank. These were composed of 30 associations which included nine cricket teams, four football teams, four rugby teams, a rowing club, a swimming team, a tennis club, a boxing club, a rifle club, a chess team, a photographic club, a debating society and an orchestra. In addition, a Cross Country and Athletic Association was in the course of formation, and a Motor Cycle Club was being planned.<sup>16</sup> Not content with this, however, the Magazine added, ‘... With all these activities...we still lack a Sword Club, and Mr A.F. Hatten, of Wimbledon Branch, is anxious to know if any member of the Staff is willing to meet him occasionally for a little fencing. We hope this invitation will prove to be the nucleus of yet another Club’.<sup>17</sup>

No organisation, however, out-did Holborn Bars, the headquarters of the Prudential, which appears to have been as much a social centre as one which organised life assurance. All of the various clubs of the company, which emerged from around the 1860s were affiliated in 1871 to the Prudential Clerks’ Society, which later became known as ‘The Ibis’.<sup>18</sup> By 1878 the Society had begun publishing its own journal which reported the activities of the various clubs, as well as providing articles on social, literary, artistic and contemporary subjects. Like the GWR Athletic Association, the society was supported and sponsored by the directors and senior management of the company. In addition to the cricket grounds at Dulwich, its rowing club and rifle range, Holborn Bars itself had a library, a gymnasium, reading

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<sup>16</sup> The County and Westminster Magazine, 1911, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Laurie Dennet, A Sense of Security: 150 Years of Prudential, (Cambridge: Granta Editions, 1998), p. 87.

rooms, a canteen and a staff hall with stage. The latter regularly hosted concerts, plays, music, and social events including the regular Christmas performances.<sup>19</sup>

A major event for many was the annual sports day in which the staff, their family and friends participated. In addition the clubs themselves organised leagues in which they competed with teams from other companies. From 1908, for example, an annual Inter-Banks' Athletic Championship was held at Stamford Bridge.<sup>20</sup> Inter-bank matches were also played between rowing clubs and cricket and football clubs. Banks had their own London football league which competed yearly for the Banks Challenge Cup.<sup>21</sup> At major matches members of staff would attend matches in support of their respective teams. In 1913 the Oxford Street Branch faced the Country Managers for The Leaf Cup, the Inter-Departmental tennis trophy of the London County and Westminster Bank. The branch chartered a motor omnibus which brought the team and their supporters to the sports grounds at Norbury.<sup>22</sup> Such support for sporting clubs clearly enhanced staff loyalty. In supporting their team clerks were associating themselves with their branches, departments or companies. In relation to this, staff colours, badges, songs and a whole host of other insignia grew up around these teams, thus ultimately strengthening the bond between clerk, organisation and office.<sup>23</sup>

The teams were well patronised, and the clubs well attended. In 1911, for example, the membership of the London and County Sports Club stood at 1,233 out of a possible figure of 2,700.<sup>24</sup> Just under 50% of the staff therefore belonged to its clubs,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 156-61. See also *The Ibis Magazine*, 1878-1914.

<sup>20</sup> *The County Magazine*, 1908, p. 107.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 87.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 1913, p. 173.

<sup>23</sup> See advert for L.C.C. Cricket Club Colours in *The London County Council Gazette*, April, 1904.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 1911, p. 108.

a high figure if one considers that many of its clerks would have been spread out all over the South-East of England in its various branches. Membership appears to have been common among younger clerks before they married.<sup>25</sup>

There were other purposes in establishing such clubs, associations and journals than simply maintaining staff loyalty. One was to attempt to instil in the staff a sense of working together in a common community, to create a sense of belonging in the face of growing bureaucratisation and impersonal relations that were affecting some organisations. To build up, in the words of these clubs and associations, a sense of esprit de corps.<sup>26</sup> In December, 1904, for example, Mr Blair, an officer in the Education Department of the L.C.C., gave a speech to 300 guests at the Annual Staff Dinner. In it he urged the younger members of the staff to associate themselves in their clubs and institutions, so as to, ‘...weld and cement together the great body that we represent here tonight.’<sup>27</sup> The opening edition of The County Magazine, in 1907, stated that one of its principle aims was to, ‘...keep warm the feeling of comradeship which absence from the centre of activity may tend to lessen.’<sup>28</sup> For a bank such as the County which had over 250 branches spread over London and the south-east of England this was crucial.

Finally, sport helped to reinforce political distinctions within this community. In many of these company and organisational sporting and social organisations a common trend is seen in their formal structures. At the top was the president of the society, who, particularly in the case of larger clubs such as the athletics society,

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<sup>25</sup> See ‘Sport, Matrimony and Domestic Bliss’ in The County Magazine, 1909, pp. 6-8.

<sup>26</sup> See T.E. Young and Richard Masters, Insurance Office Organisation, Management and Accounts, (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1904), p. 46.

<sup>27</sup> The London County Council Gazette, December, 1904, p. 172.

<sup>28</sup> The County Magazine, 1907, p. 3.

would normally be the chairman of the company or a senior director. Below him were vice-Presidents who were usually directors and senior management. Below them were the secretary of the club, its treasurer and the members of its governing committee. These men were usually senior members of the staff. Below these were the members of the club itself, made up predominately of the general staff.<sup>29</sup> The power structures of these social organisations therefore replicated similar structures found in the work place. Lord Goschen at the London, County and Westminster Bank may have sincerely enjoyed giving talks at the Sports Club dinners, assisting the Rowing Club, or taking part in the discussions of the Literary and Debating Society in the Bank. Yet while doing this, he was reinforcing and legitimating the entire power matrix of the organisation which he directed.

Sport thus played a crucial role in these emerging new bureaucracies. Old forms of personal patronage were replaced by the corporate patronage of these organisations in the assistance they gave to their staff via their sporting and social activities. Instead of giving direct personal assistance, a company, such as the Great Western Railway, now contributed money towards a sports ground. Such support integrated the Staff more fully into the newer impersonal relations which were beginning to dominate the larger firms. It gave them a sense of a common organisational identity. In the face of such versatility and usefulness it is no wonder that such sporting and social clubs were springing up in offices in London, and why so many directors and senior management were so willing to give so generously to such activities for the 'benefit' of their staff.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See National Archives RAIL 258/237 'Great Western Railway (London) Athletic Association, 1900-47'. See also R.J. Morris, 'Clubs, Societies and Associations', pp. 412-3, for a discussion of this template which was common to many voluntary associations of the period.

<sup>30</sup> See Lord Goschen's speech in The County and Westminster Magazine, 1913, p. 173.

## Changes in Pay Structure

An important change in the relationship between the clerk and his employer was renumeration. Increasingly, pay scales replaced the older system of arbitrary pay increases. The newer system meant that a clerk was paid at a certain rate depending on how long he worked for a company or office. Increases were strictly regulated according to the scale and affected all clerks.

Such a system of payment first appeared in the Civil Service. On the recommendations of The Playfair Commission the Lower Division of the Civil Service was created by an Order in Council of 12<sup>th</sup> February, 1876. A salary scale was established of £80 to £200 rising by triennial increments of £15, or £90 rising by similar increments to £250.<sup>31</sup> Such pay scales quickly spread to other areas of clerical work. Like company subsidised sporting activities, they tended to be implemented initially by larger employers such as the railways and banks and then disseminated down to smaller organisations. At the London and Westminster Bank for example, in 1909, clerical salaries started at £64 and increased at a rate of £8 per annum for 17 years, and £10 for the subsequent 10 years. In addition, there were 'class salaries' for those not holding special appointments. A fourth class clerk could earn up to £20 extra a year, a third class clerk up to £40 extra, a second class clerk £60 and a first class clerk £100. Again these extra incomes were subject to incremental increases, an annual increase of £5 for fourth and third class clerks, and £10 for second and first

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<sup>31</sup> Fourth Report of the Royal Commission on the Civil Service; 1914 Cd 7338, Vol. XVI, p. 16 & p. 19.

class clerks. A first class clerk at the end of his scale could therefore earn £400 per annum.<sup>32</sup>

While not universal in London, especially amongst smaller firms, such arrangements were becoming increasingly the norm for clerical workers. Firms, such as the Metropolitan Board of Water often adapted Civil Service rates of pay to their own scales.<sup>33</sup> Trumans, the London Brewers, for example, had by 1903, a system of minimum and maximum salaries based on class.<sup>34</sup> Such changes introduced a radical shift in relations between employers and clerks. Pay became based on an objective criteria which had been previously agreed rather than on the goodwill of the employer. Employees now worked their way up the scale as salary became based on a depersonalised system of annual rises .

Such a change had clear implications for how clerks negotiated with their employers over pay increases. In the older system increases were organised on an individual basis. Employers who personally knew their clerks awarded rises on individual merit and need. This system was still in existence in London. William Evans, for example, a legal clerk, was married on September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1897. On December 11<sup>th</sup> he was given a 5/- a week pay increase. A similar increase came the following December, four months after the birth of his first daughter.<sup>35</sup> In the newer system, in offices where such intimate relations were impossible, attempts to increase the overall level of salaries could only come about if the entire scale was altered. Such changes were

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<sup>32</sup> RBSG Archives GB 1502/LWB/113, 'London and Westminster Rules and Regulations, 1909'

<sup>33</sup> W.S. Chevalier, London's Water Supply, 1903-53. A Review of the Metropolitan Water Board, (London: Staple Press Ltd, 1953), p. 333.

<sup>34</sup> London Metropolitan Archives B/THB/F/3 'Messrs Truman, Hanbury, Buxton and Co., Brewers Clerks Salaries and Rest Expenses, 1898-1920'.

<sup>35</sup> London Borough of Hackney Archives Department, DS/EVA/1-3, 'The Diaries of William Evans', December 11<sup>th</sup>, 1897 & December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1898.



facilitated by the whole staff acting in unison to demand such alterations. As a result, as will be seen in Chapter VIII, clerks began to discover new advantages in acting together against their employers. Such a development inevitably had radical implications for the whole nexus of employer/employee relations amongst clerical workers. It was in such a change that the seeds of clerical co-operation began to develop. It is no surprise, for example, that clerical trade unions and associations initially appeared in the Civil Service and the railway companies where such pay scales had first been introduced.<sup>36</sup>

## **Division of Labour**

Perhaps the most important change for the clerk in relation to the work he carried out was an increased division of labour and with this specialisation which first appeared in the early part of the nineteenth century. There were clerks who kept accounts, wrote correspondence, supervised, etc.<sup>37</sup> The change in this period was one of degree rather than of kind. Its extent, however, caused radical changes in clerical work. The change was due to four factors. The first was because of increases in the size of many organisations. As offices got bigger there was an increased need to assign certain individuals to certain tasks to maintain efficiency. The second was increased competition. Increased market entry and the expansion of existing companies in the latter half of the nineteenth century created a more competitive environment. In 1896, for example. Richard Foster, of the City firm of merchants Knowles and Foster commented that:

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<sup>36</sup> See B.V. Humphreys, *Clerical Unions in the Civil Service*, (London: Blackwell and Mott, 1958) and Malcom Wallace, *Single or Return The History of the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association*, (London: Transport Salaried Staffs' Association, 1996)

<sup>37</sup> Paul Attewell, 'The Clerk Deskilled'

In these days of railways, steamships and telegraphs, merchants have to work more cheaply than they did forty or fifty years ago, and they have to do more work to make an equal, perhaps a smaller amount of money.<sup>38</sup>

In such an environment employers became much more cost conscious. Clerks, among other employees, were put to more efficient use, their labour was divided more rationally. The third factor was the introduction of various technologies and the application of more rational approaches in the workplace.<sup>39</sup> Typewriters, telephones, addressographs, adding machines, copiers, filing systems, etc., to be used most effectively needed to be used by certain groups of clerical workers. More sophisticated systems of accountancy and storing and retrieving information required greater division of workers. The final factor was the growth, as has been seen earlier, of the dual labour market in clerical work. Some clerks specialised in particular areas of work, other were divided between more routine tasks. Clearly the extent to which this happened was partially related to the size of a company, the larger the organisation, the greater the division of labour.

The reaction of many commentators to these changes was generally negative. The Clerk in February, 1908, for example, argued that, the whole trend of modern commerce precluded the advancement of the modern clerk,

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<sup>38</sup> Ronald C. Mitchie, The City of London, Continuity and Change, 1850-1990, (London: Macmillan Academic and Professional Ltd., 1992), p. 42.

<sup>39</sup> See Lawrence R. Dicksee, Office Organisation and Management, (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons Ltd., 1910), Chapter V.

The small office now gives place to the great bureaux of such limited liability companies and trusts, and the two or three clerks of the office of the past are replaced by small armies of men and women for that matter, who, are pretty much like teeth in a great administrative machine. Concentration of this character has led to differentiation of function with the result that each individual tends to become specialised on one operation, and the possibility of getting into his fingers all the operation of the office are remote. Such being the case, that very fact alone suffices to fix the clerk permanently in one particular groove.<sup>40</sup>

The language used here was typical of the critique of the age. Newspapers, clerical unions, writers such as George Bernard Shaw who had the misfortune to have previously been clerks, all voiced the sad plight of the black coated worker.<sup>41</sup> Clerks were increasingly portrayed as becoming dehumanised parts of colossal bureaucratic machines.

Closer examination of the work that clerks carried out, the policies of companies towards their staff, and clerical career histories reveals that much of this criticism was unfounded. There is strong evidence which suggests that clerks throughout their working career within one organisation frequently changed jobs. This could either take the form of being transferred to a new section, department, or branch, or being given different responsibilities within their existing units. Very often it involved both. George Dewley, for example, entered the service of the Great Western Railway as a clerk in 1890. Between that date and 1909 his work experience was anything but

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<sup>40</sup> The Clerk, February, 1908, p. 25.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., January, 1908, p. 8.

static. For the first two years of his career he worked on railway passes at Southall, Castle Hill, Ealing, and Bourne End. After this he worked for 5 years in the Receiving Office at 193, Oxford Road. For the next four years he worked in the same office at Minories. In 1905 he was promoted to Agent at 124 Holborn, W.C., a position analogous to Station Master on the goods side of the railways.<sup>42</sup> Though Dewley was not typical of the hundreds of clerks found in the Staff Register of the Great Western who joined between 1890 and 1910, for not all clerks became agents or station masters, he was in no way an exception. It was change rather than continuity which was the rule in the GWR, a company which at the time had one of the most finely divided systems of clerical labour.

This tendency was found to be case in the various potted career histories of clerks who had retired or died in the clerical and company journals consulted.<sup>43</sup> The diaries and interviews repeat this trend. All five diaries revealed changes at least once in the clerical work carried out by their writers. Andrew Carlyle Tait, for example, started working as a boy clerk in September 1894 for the City stationery manufacturers James Spicer and Co. Tait's work included writing and copying letters, invoice work, and collecting samples. As he himself wrote, 'My duties are too numerous to suit me. I attend to all the letters in the evening, order as well for out department.'<sup>44</sup> Tait's diary, unfortunately, only dealt with a few days of his working experience, from September 4<sup>th</sup> to September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1894. After this was an entry for November 4<sup>th</sup> of the same year stating that he has been transferred to the Counting Department and one for November 5<sup>th</sup> which chiefly described his firework display at home in Ilford. Following this there is a final undated entry which had clearly been written some time

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<sup>42</sup> National Archives, RAIL 264/8, 'Great Western Railway Register of Clerks, 1835-1911'.

<sup>43</sup> Archives of Prudential Plc, MS-1292 'Life Claim Department Papers'

<sup>44</sup> Guildhall Library, MS-20383, 'Diary of Andrew Carlyle Tait', September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1894,.

after. In this section Tait described the subsequent changes which had taken place at work, including those of people he had earlier worked with and described,

...I looked into its [the diary's] pages and thought how things had changed. I am still at Spicers, but the drudgery of the Boards dept. is far behind. I got set down a peg or two after a months muddling of the work and have since risen till I am now Junior Clerk o' the Manchester Dept. under the same Wells aforementioned with Mr Cayser as Manager. Aylott has left, Mr. Marshall is dead, and only the Managers stick to the same tasks as when I came.<sup>45</sup>

Tait's initial experience seems to be fairly typical. Office boys were regularly transferred between different departments. What is most interesting, however, is his late comment indicating the extent of change of the clerical duties carried out at Spicers.

There were several important reasons for the relative frequency in changes in the duties which clerks carried out. The first was the preferred system of internal promotion, discussed in the previous chapter, which virtually all organisations implemented. Companies often shifted clerks, particularly promising ones, around the various departments and branches of a company in order to prepare them for promotion to higher positions.<sup>46</sup> A railway clerk, for example, might be shifted between different stations, then moved back to head office where he was moved between different sections and departments, and then transferred to a more senior position in another station or regional office. Banks often did the same. Clerk H, for

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., no date given, last written entry.

<sup>46</sup> See Young and Masters, Insurance Office Organisation, pp. 27-8.

example, began working for the London and County Bank in 1898 at Midhurst. From 1899 to 1901 he was at Chichester, 1902 to 1906 at Worthing, 1907 to 1909 at Brighton, 1910 at Lombard Street, 1911 in the Birbeck branch, 1912 to 1914 at Knightsbridge and 1915 at Hanover Square. From 1915 to 1919 he joined up and was a Second Lieutenant commanding No. 6 Railway Supply Detachment in the First Army of the British Expeditionary Force in France. In 1919 he was promoted to Inspector's Clerk, in 1921 he was made the manager of the Yarmouth Branch and in 1925 was promoted to Inspector of Branches.<sup>47</sup> The experience which Clerk H gained at Head Office and all these different branches would have been crucial to his promotion. In addition, with the bank expanding in this period, experienced clerks were often transferred to new branches.

Such a policy of transfer was also partially due to the fact that British offices in commerce, industry and government had no formal system of training. Britain distinguished itself from its competitors by the amount clerks were expected to 'learn on the job.'<sup>48</sup> This came from a combination of learning ones duties whilst actually doing them and gaining knowledge from existing experienced members of staff. The fact that clerks tended to work in small groups, even in large bureaucracies, facilitated this process. David King has described this process at the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank,

...their [clerks] qualification for promotion depended on what insight they gained from their clerical assignments and/or what informal instruction, what hints at implications were given them by their immediate supervisors. A junior

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<sup>47</sup> RBSG Archives GB 1502/WES/20 'Clerk H Letters (London and County)'

<sup>48</sup> See Robert R. Locke. The End of the Practical Man, Entrepreneurship and Higher Education in Germany, France, and Great Britain, 1880-1940, (Greenwich, Connecticut: Jai Press Inc., 1984)

who showed interest might be told quietly of the secrets of exchange rate calculations, a junior on current accounts asking whether an overdraft should be permitted might be subjected to a barrage of questions relative to his knowledge on the account, questions designed to instruct him in the principles of personal credit.<sup>49</sup>

As clerical work was often part of a larger whole, rather than atomised units of autonomous production, experience of the different processes that items of office work went through was crucial before an individual could actually be promoted to a position of responsibility. As a result, clerks would be regularly transferred to different sections and departments, once they had become proficient in their existing work. Again the process was by no means uniform for all clerks. More promising individuals would be transferred more often, less capable clerks less so. Despite this, however, to perform all but the most mechanical clerical activities it was necessary, particularly in a clerk's early years, to move him around the office.

A good example of this was bookkeeping. Account books, especially in larger companies, often related to other books. Depositing or withdrawing money from a bank account, for example, required entries being made by the cashier in his books, by another clerk in the waste book, by another in the current account register, or in the sectional check ledgers, and by another in the 'Current Accounts' of the general ledger. Checks would be entered into the clearing book, bills of exchange would have their separate ledger.<sup>50</sup> In order to be promoted to Inspector, as was H.P.G. Archer, one would need years of experience on all these separate ledgers, in order to detect,

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<sup>49</sup> The History of the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, Vol. II, pp. 182-3.

<sup>50</sup> See J.F. Davis, Bank Organisation and Accounts, (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1910), Chapter 8.

for example, any irregularities in the entries. To understand fully how the accounts of an organisation worked, one therefore required experience working on the various ledgers which made up the greater whole. Transferring clerks to different ledgers was part and parcel of the effective running of a bureaucracy and the smooth operation of promotion and filling senior positions.

It was because of this that seniority was so important to clerks. The longer a clerk worked for an office the more knowledge and insight he gained into how its different parts worked. This fact was reflected in the incremental pay structure of a clerk's salary. As a clerk became more experienced the value of his work increased.<sup>51</sup> Work for many clerks had long learning curves. It is in this respect, rather than the actual tasks that were carried out, which made office work skilled work. This was a fact which eluded many contemporaries who saw in clerical work mindless repetitive tasks which could be performed by anybody who could read, write and add up. John Stuart Mill, for example, observed in the 1860s, to the chagrin of many clerks, 'A clerk from whom nothing is required but the mechanical labour of copying gains more than an equivalent for his mere exertion if he receives the wage of a bricklayer's labourer. His work is not a tenth part as hard, it is quite easy to learn, and his condition is less precarious, a clerk's place being generally a place for life.'<sup>52</sup> Such remarks made John Francis Davis in his work on banking which appeared in 1910 ponder how so able a man as Mill could come out with such remarks, which displayed in his own words, '...a remarkable want of insight into the nature of the clerk's work'<sup>53</sup>. Copying was just one part of a modern clerk's qualifications, clerical

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<sup>51</sup> See Samuel Cohn, *The Process of Occupational Sex-Typing*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), Chapter IV.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*



work was quite as fatiguing as that of a brick layer, writing and spelling correctly were themselves relatively scarce skills. Finally if one took Mill's arguments to their logical conclusion, Davis argued, a navvy ought to receive more than a prime minister. A qualified clerk at 18, was, in his opinion worth in the open market twice if not three times the wages of a first-rate bricklayer.<sup>54</sup>

### **Clerical Turnover**

Clerks were not, however, always prepared to patiently work their way up, 'waiting for dead men's shoes', as the saying went. Despite corporate patronage, some clerks moved around between companies. Ties between clerks and the workplace appear to have weakened during this period. An examination of the Clerks Register at Glyn's Bank, for example, belies the generally held belief that clerks stayed with one employer for life. Out of the 235 clerks taken on by Glyn's between 1890 and 1914, 67 had left by the end of 1914. None of these were due to enlisting in the armed forces for the hostilities which started in this year. Reasons given were death, resignation (no reason given), resignation due to ill health, resignation to change to a different job, or dismissal. One clerk even absconded with £113. Only thirteen resigned on account of ill health. Another resigned due to lunacy, one died while still working, and one individual shot himself accidentally in the head!<sup>55</sup>

Most resignations at Glyn's took place within the first two years of a clerk joining the bank, or around five years later in order to join another bank. It the case of the former

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid,

<sup>55</sup> RBSG Archives GB 1502/GM/339/1, 'Glyn's clerks register, 1864-1918'

it is highly likely that clerks were forced to resign – effectively they were dismissed. Clerk I, for example, left the bank on 9 February, 1891, only having joined on 2 June, 1890. The Registrar reads, ‘...Found him unequal to the work and got him appointed to North British Insurance Co.’<sup>56</sup> Many, especially those who left after five years did so to move to a better position. For them this was real upward mobility. A number had, in fact, previously worked for other companies. In this respect, those who did leave were simply following an established precedent. Clerk J, for example, born in 1861, entered the bank in 1880 after having worked for four years at The Railway Clearing House. He resigned on 14<sup>th</sup> December, 1892, to take up a position in the Bank of Montreal.<sup>57</sup> Many clerks left their positions, like Clerk J, to work abroad. In countries with developing economies from Canada to Australia, and Japan to Argentina, there was strong demand for men with clerical skills and experience of business. The result for some was elevation to positions which they would have had to have waited years to achieve at home. Clerk K, for example, left Glyn’s in February, 1896 to become the Registrar of the Government of South Australia, a position he received at the relatively early age of thirty six.<sup>58</sup>

Yet it was not just to go abroad that clerks gave up positions. Clerks were also increasingly able to move to different companies. Evidence of such a change can be seen in the growth of Radius Agreements between employers and clerks which began to appear around the turn of the twentieth century. These prohibited clerks from accepting similar employment within a specified distance or ‘radius’ of the place of business at which they were engaged.<sup>59</sup> The principal aim of such an agreement was

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Edward A. Cope, Clerks Their Rights and Obligations, p. 78.

to prevent clerks working for neighbouring competitors, taking with them important and potentially damaging information from their previous employers. These agreements were by no means universal. In 1909, for example, they were said by Edward Cope to be 'very far from being general, but it is obviously growing'.<sup>60</sup> Their very existence and growth, however, is a clear indication of the increased manoeuvrability of clerks by 1900.

### **The Working Atmosphere of the Office**

Frank H.H. King has argued in relation to the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank that as the organisation grew larger discipline became more important in the office. It was a discipline King argued, 'coming not from self-motivation of the ambitious, mature clerk, in close contact with an inspired leader, but a discipline enforced downwards by a Sub-Manager on a group of youngsters'.<sup>61</sup> Growth in organisations usually resulted in an influx of large numbers of adolescent boys, often fresh from school.

Congregated together in close contact in offices all day with work to carry out and agendas to keep to, discipline clearly became an issue. In such an environment, regulations and rules, enforced by senior clerks, quickly began to multiply. A host of such standing orders has been illustrated by King. One on 13 July 1893 ordered that, 'The practice of throwing pellets of paper about the office must be discontinued'. Others related to late arrival, smoking during office hours, taking longer over tea breaks, lurking in the corridors and sitting in the basement. One was issued against putting pins in the mouth for fear of contracting blood poisoning.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Frank H.H. King, *The History of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank*, Vol. I, p. 574.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. Vol. II, p. 176.

Strict hierarchies imposing chains of command, impersonal regulations and rules all contributed to imposing increased discipline in the office. In many respects these bureaucratic structures imitated the public schools which two or three generations earlier had been faced with similar problems of control.<sup>63</sup> The hierarchies of masters, senior boys and juniors was replaced by managers, special officers, senior and junior clerks. House loyalty was replaced by allegiance to department and branch. Attendance registers replaced school registers, manager special reports those of school reports.

The Establishment Committee Reports of the London and Westminster Bank for 21<sup>st</sup> April, 1904, give an excellent example of the above comments, and how, in general, discipline was imposed by the bank. They read as follows,

The Committee proceeded to consider the Manager's Special reports upon the Staff, as on the 1<sup>st</sup> of March last.

Clerk L, 4<sup>th</sup> Class, Assistant Clearer, City Office appeared before the Committee, the report stating that he is a very slow clerk, not able to do his appointed duties, and not recommended for promotion, and it was resolved that Mr. Hill's salary be fixed at the present amount, £188 per annum and that he endeavour to find other employment within a reasonable time.

Clerk M, 4<sup>th</sup> Class Crediting Clerk, City Office, who is reported as a troublesome clerk, frequently absent, and frequently late was also told that he

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<sup>63</sup> See J.A. Mangan's, Athleticism in the Edwardian Public School: The Emergence and Consolidation of an Educational Ideology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981)

must endeavour to find other employment within a reasonable time and in the mean time his salary to be fixed at the present amount viz, £148 a year.

Clerk N, City Office (Teller) said to have ability, but cannot be recommended for 4<sup>th</sup> Class at present, was reprimanded, and warned to be more careful in his work and manner in future.

Clerk O, 3<sup>rd</sup> Class, Inscribed Stock Clerk, Country Office, 'A capable clerk but not always reliable' was warned to be more careful.

Clerk P, 4<sup>th</sup> Class, Inscribed Stock Clerk, Country Office, 'Has ability but is wanting in industry and requires constant supervision' was cautioned and warned that better report will be expected at the 2<sup>nd</sup> of six months.<sup>64</sup>

Discipline was clearly tight at the bank. Dismissal for failing to obey the rules was an option. Yet the transfer for many of these juniors from school to office was relatively smooth. Both had hierarchy, discipline, deskwork and plenty of sport. King even notes that the food served at the subsidised Luncheon Club of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank was reminiscent of school meals.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the introduction of such discipline, however, one must not exaggerate the restrictions which were imposed on clerical workers in their office. Clerks for a significant part of their working life were not chained to their desks. At the Prudential, for example, when a shareholder complained to Henry Harben, the Secretary of the

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<sup>64</sup> RBSG Archives GB 1502/LWB/116/17 'London and Westminster establishment committee minute book 1903 to 1904'

<sup>65</sup> Frank H.H. King, Vol. II, p. 178.

company, about the conduct of his clerks at the Annual General Meeting in 1872 he replied, 'I fully admit that our clerks do read the papers and chatter; but I have yet to learn that human nature can go on all day long without some little relaxation.'<sup>66</sup> Such a liberal attitude was certainly evident forty years latter. At the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, despite all its regulations, H.E. Muriel noted, 'I entered London office in Lombard Street in 1905 from Westminster Bank; the change from a formal ordered strict regime to the undergraduate atmosphere of the Hong Kong Bank was very pleasant though rather startling...about half of us were reasonably serious over our work'.<sup>67</sup> The degree of discipline was clearly relative to the institution. At the Commercial Gas Company in East London around the Christmas period, clerks regularly returned to work after extended lunch breaks worse the wear for a few drinks. On December 28<sup>th</sup>, 1902, for example, George Rose wrote,

The work comes as a very unwelcome change. And indeed there's very little of it done in our office. In the afternoon four choice spirits go out and drink, (Harry [chief clerk] is ill and away). They come into the office at about 4.30 and more or less drunk and kick up a wicked row, and we are supposed to be working till seven tonight! S. Jones is upstairs so there'll be trouble tomorrow.<sup>68</sup>

Despite Rose's predictions nothing was done about it, and several more similar incidents appeared in his diaries.

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<sup>66</sup> Laurie Dennet, A Sense of Security: 150 Years of Prudential, (Cambridge: Granta Editions, 1998), p. 85.

<sup>67</sup> David King, Vol. II, p. 176.

<sup>68</sup> Essex Records Office, D/DU4/8/1, 'Diaries of George Rose', December 28<sup>th</sup>, 1902.

Discipline also depended on the individual concerned. Asked whether the workplace was strict, Arthur Whitlock, after 51 years clerical experience, cryptically answered, 'Well, that was left to our own discretion to a certain extent, really.'<sup>69</sup> In the myriad and often highly political relations of clerks and seniors at work in London in this period what else could one expect? Friction between clerks and seniors could, however, boil over into open confrontation. Sydney Moseley's relations with his immediate superior Mr. Almond seemed to oscillate between paternal affection and open warfare. On July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1904, Moseley wrote,

Went to the office full of determination to 'be a man' – but Fate opposed! My boss Almond kicked up a row, I joined in, and then – behold - a big Row – lost his temper. He shouted: 'If Mr Smythe [Senior Manager] were here you wouldn't be working another five minutes.' I answered him back and he said that tomorrow when Mr. Smythe returns he would tell him and see that I left without getting any pay and without a character. Fine eh? Just see what that means...Here I am alone in the world – no Father – No Mother – No Employment and no 'good Character' certificate. Still I don't care!! My strong-willed nature would have the better of me; so I sneered at his remarks.

At 7 o'clock I was in the washroom when he came in (of course I arranged to be there!) We had a talk. He gave me some good advice and we are friends again.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> British Library, Millennium Memory Bank C900/07507 'Arthur Whitlock'.

<sup>70</sup> Sydney Moseley, The Private Diaries of Sydney Moseley, (London: Max Parish, 1960), p. 11.

Indiscipline and resistance to authority could take other, more subtle forms. In 1882, for example, the widely disliked manager of Glyn's Bank, William Newmarch, said to be a rough, uncouth Yorkshireman with a grating accent, suffered a stroke at work. It was whispered that the clerks who carried him out were careful to bump his head on each of the steps so that he would not return. In this, Roger Fulford assures us, they were successful.<sup>71</sup>

Finally, it should not be assumed that clerks were kept behind their desks, writing continuously until allowed to go home. Offices were at times relatively relaxed and flexible. At Glyn's if a clerk wanted an afternoon at Lord's he could usually manage it by paying someone else to do his work for him.<sup>72</sup> Offices were tolerant about giving leave to clerks who felt ill. George Rose's office went through periods of seemingly total inactivity. On May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1910, for example, he wrote,

Arriving at Stepney at about 9 a.m. the next hour is consumed in newspaper reading and toilet operations, and from ten, I give desultory attention to the collection of Gas Revenue; until twelve o'clock lunch. This hour allows me 30 minutes in which to rush off indigestively to the Dock Sketch [a picture he was working on] and the next hour I am allowed to do what I like, it is winked at, in fact the head clerk goes to sleep next to my desk. After two the office fills again and I retire on some small pretext to an empty room upstairs where I doze, only interrupted by a telephone which asks me to go to a concert with

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<sup>71</sup> Roger Fulford, *Glyn's: 1753-1953*, p. 184.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* p. 172.



it. The next noticeable thing is a cup of tea after which I furtively write rubbish in this book till 4.30 when I prepare to leave my clerkly labours.<sup>73</sup>

Such periods, however, were sandwiched between others, such as quarterly accounts, when clerks worked continuously till late in the evening.<sup>74</sup> Despite this, office work for many did not seem to be as strenuous as one would think.

We are thus faced with an almost paradoxical situation in relation to discipline in the office. On the one hand, there existed a strict regimen, a tight hierarchy, and ever-expanding rules. On the other, there was flexibility, leniency and, on occasions, an almost complete disregard for working practices. Much of this, however, was dependent on context and situation. Juniors were subjected to much stronger discipline than seniors. Individuals like Sydney Moseley were ‘punished’ later on by being refused promotion.<sup>75</sup> Acts of theft, dishonesty and character lapses were treated with the most severe punishments. Clerks at Glyn’s, for example, were dismissed for ‘insobriety’, impecuniosity or marrying too early. Clerk Q was dismissed in February 1913 for pilfering stamps.<sup>76</sup> Employers were lenient to clerks during lax phases in return for obedience and hard work during heavy periods of work when most clerks did not leave their desks. In many respects, the working atmosphere of the office was probably not all that different from how it is today.

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<sup>73</sup> George Rose Diaries, May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1910

<sup>74</sup> See *Ibid.*, January 7<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup>, 1902.

<sup>75</sup> The Private Diaries, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1906.

<sup>76</sup> RBSG Archives GB 1502/GM/339/1, ‘Glyn’s clerks register 1864-1918’

## **Conclusion**

Between 1880 and 1914 a revolution took place in most offices in London. Though uneven in their extent, discernable trends took place – the introduction of technology, specialisation, growth of dual labour markets, for some growth in companies, and perhaps most importantly, changes in markets relating to labour, capital and products. These changes had an important impact on clerical work.

These affected two specific areas, the clerk's relation to his office, and his relation to his work. In relation to the former, relations became more impersonal. Clerks changed from commercial servants to office workers, employees of companies and government offices. As this happened formal pay structures, fringe benefits and social welfare appeared. Much of this was done in an attempt to reintegrate clerks back into their workplace. Work for many clerks changed. Specialisation became increasingly the norm for the clerk. Pay became more incremental. The result of all of this was that clerks took a more long term perspective towards their work. Finally, as work became more specialised and complex, the office became more formalised. Discipline became more rigorous. These changes should not, however, be overemphasised. Discipline was only enforced when the work demanded it. At other times the atmosphere of many offices was relaxed and flexible.

In all these changes, one should not see inauspicious developments. Changes in relations with employers may have resulted in a more depersonalised set of immediate working relations, yet they also resulted in more formalised benefits for the clerk which were not dependent on human caprice. For a group of individuals who valued

security, such changes must not have appeared to have been completely unfavourable. Nor, in fact, would have been the growth in sporting and social facilities supplied by the workplace, which appear to have been genuinely appreciated by clerical workers. Similar arguments can be applied to work. Why would increased specialisation over a life-long working period have been so bad? If one was kept to doing one job, there are certainly grounds to believe this. Evidence shows, however, that this was not the case. Increased division of labour, in the context of the London (and British) office with its lack of formal training, only worked if one was transferred around the office and between departments. In addition, such specialisation gradually increased the worth of the clerk which became reflected in his salary and sense of security.

Finally, these changes made the clerk more independent. The corpus of laws which emerged in this period created increasingly established parameters which he was able to operate in on a more even and steady basis. Increased specialisation and a growing market resulted in his skills becoming more marketable and a growing ability to transfer between employers. The increase in security, ensured by his growing skill and formal pay structure, gave him more freedom to devote more of his energy elsewhere. While in some respects clerks were becoming more integrated into their work, in others they were becoming more detached from it. In such an emerging environment, developments do not appear to have been particularly pernicious.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Attitudes of the Clerk towards Work**

What did the clerk think about his work? What values did he invest in it? Security and a regular income have already been discussed. For most clerks, in an insecure age, these were clearly the most important aspects of their work. Yet beyond this there were other values attached to clerical work. Values which gave clerical work significance despite some of its more monotonous characteristics.

These values will be looked at in this chapter. They can be seen as the non-manual character of clerical work, professionalism, service, character, esprit de corps, the importance of working in London and, the reward for all of these, promotion. Clerks did not carry out manual labour. This was something they were aware of. An essential element of their job was service. Clerks did not produce tangible goods but rather provided services which were beneficial to those they served. It will be argued that this concept of service changed towards the end of the nineteenth century from services rendered to an individual to those rendered to the company or for the community at large. In addition, there were a number of qualities which were felt to be essential. One was the need to be conscientious, to take pride in work, and furthermore to try and improve ones clerical skills. This was expressed in the idea of professionalism. Moreover, to be able to carry out work proficiently, it was felt that

one needed to have character. This was felt to be vital to clerical work in terms of an individual's honesty, sobriety, willingness to improve ones self, and ultimately for promotion.

Esprit de corps was another important factor for clerks. It meant the ability to see oneself as part of a larger group, a working community rather than an anonymous unit of production. In addition, working in London was felt to add value to a clerk's work. There is evidence of a wide spread feeling of pride amongst clerical workers at working in what was considered by many of them as the greatest city in the world. Finally, promotion was regarded by clerks with great esteem. Next to security, promotion was probably the most important factor in a clerk's working life. It was often seen as the sum factor of all the other qualities needed for clerical work, the reward for the work one did and for the qualities which enabled one to do it. In this respect, promotion was often as important ideologically as it was practically. This chapter will look at all these elements in turn.

In the final part of this chapter, the question of whether clerks were satisfied with their work will be posed. Clerks have been depicted by commentators as being dissatisfied with their work.<sup>1</sup> The bases of these remarks will be criticised. Sources which have sustained these views, it will be suggested, have been looked at uncritically. Many were not written by clerks, others were written by individuals who had worked in offices for only short periods, some by clerks writing in journals whose sole aim was to criticise clerical work. While no doubt not all clerical workers were satisfied, the

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<sup>1</sup> See Gregory Anderson, Victorian Clerks, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), Paul Attewell, 'The Clerk Deskilled: A Study in False Nostalgia', Journal of Historical Sociology Vol.2 No. 4, December 1989, R. Guerriero Wilson, Disillusionment or New Opportunities? The Changing Nature of Work in Offices, Glasgow 1880-1914, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998)

question which needs to be asked is how representative of clerks were this group? Evidence from the diaries and interviews, for example, shows approval or at least a lack of dissatisfaction from clerical workers. This chapter will conclude by arguing that the value system outlined above created in clerks a coherent sense of occupational masculinity based around the value system depicted in this chapter. As a result of material security and the lack of stasis between such a system and the environments which clerks worked in, there are serious grounds to question what has previously been written on clerical workers in relation to their attitudes towards work.

### **The Non-manual Aspect of Clerical Work**

Jose Harris, in her work on the social history of Britain between 1870 and 1914, has noted how manual work was tainted with, ‘...inferiority, bondage and lack of access to culture, status, and power.’ A study in 1895, example, was said to have, “...deplored the persistence of the ‘old stigma attaching to the workman or the factory hand’”.<sup>2</sup> While clerical work came in for attack it was never quite looked down upon by society in this way. In addition to enjoying a secure salary, and a higher income, the clerk enjoyed a higher status because he did not perform manual labour.<sup>3</sup> He got, for the most part, neither his hands nor his clothes dirty. This was something which clerks were well aware of. ‘The office is to the business, profession or trade, what the head is to the body,’ wrote The Office in October 1888, in an article entitled ‘Qualifications for Office Work’. ‘The brain’, it continued, ‘is the directing force of

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<sup>2</sup> Jose Harris, Private Lives, Public Spirits – A Social History of Britain 1870 to 1914, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 124.

<sup>3</sup> See Lee Holcombe, Victorian Ladies at Work Middle Class Working Women in England and Wales 1850-1914, (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1973), p. 12.

all the power exercised by the limbs of the body; so the power put forth in any department of a great business is directed from the office, where the principal or his trusted agent may be said to be the brain of the whole working body of subordinates. If the brain and body are not both in a healthy condition the human machine does its work imperfectly...'<sup>4</sup>. Clerks often referred to themselves as 'brain workers'.<sup>5</sup> As the analogy located them in the upper reaches of the human torso, so they distinguished themselves from the 'inferior' manual workers.

This belief also actualised itself in practices at the work place. In his study of railway workers between 1840 and 1979 Frank Mckenna has written,

Although many of the clerical officers, even after long service, still earned less than a main-line fireman, the confidence born of superior education combined with the collar and the status gave them an air of superiority when they paraded for lunch, or met the uncomfortable oil-stained artisan across a shiny-topped desk. In the presence of a clerical officer on duty, the practice of removing hats was always demanded.<sup>6</sup>

In organisations that employed both large numbers of clerks and manual workers such as the railways, the brewing industry and larger units of industrial production, clerks were associated with the management. They were members of 'The Staff', a term which then referred exclusively to the management and their administrative and executive officers rather than the whole of the workforce. T.R. Gourvish and R.G. Wilson, for example, have noted the strong distinction in the brewing industry

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<sup>4</sup> The Office, October 13<sup>th</sup>, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> See R.G. Acock's letter 'Machinery and Clerical Labour' in The Clerk, March, 1910, p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> Frank Mckenna, The Railway Workers 1840-1970, (London: Faber, 1980), p. 105.

between the brewers men engaged in the production of beer and those employed as clerks, travellers and agents. The 1907 Census of Production distinguished between the 64,953 wage earners and 14,727 salaried people, many of the latter being made up of clerical workers in addition to management and senior officials. The distinction was important as the former were charged to manufacturing expenses, while the salaries of managers, travellers, and clerks were included in distribution costs.<sup>7</sup>

This distinction from manual workers, and association with the management was clearly seen in the dress of the clerk, his suit, collar, tie and hat. To argue, as Geoffrey Crossick has done, that clerks dressed in this manner due to pretence and a need for display is crude to say the least.<sup>8</sup> Clerks dressed differently from manual workers to emphasise, as Crossick admits, that the work they carried out was essentially different.<sup>9</sup> They also did so because many were or would become management. They were often referred to, for example, as officers or officials of an organisation, whether this be in the banking, insurance, local government, utilities or railway sectors.<sup>10</sup> Finally clerks dressed in this way to represent social position. Non-manual clerical work conferred on its holders in the late-Victorian and Edwardian period middle class status. Their dress code was a simple sartorial reflection of this.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> T.R. Gourvish and R.G. Wilson, *The British Brewing Industry 1830-1980*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 197.

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Crossick, 'The Emergence of the Lower Middle Class in Britain', in Geoffrey Crossick (ed.), *The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870-1914*, (London: Croom Helm, 1977), p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> See The Royal Bank of Scotland Group Archives GB 1502/00748, 'Rules and Regulations to be Observed by the Officers of the London and County Banking Company, Limited, 1908.'

<sup>11</sup> See Christopher Breward, 'Sartorial Spectacle: clothing and masculine identities in the imperial city, 1860-1914', in Felix Driver and David Gilbert (eds.), *Imperial Cities Landscape, Display and Identity*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 244-52.



## Service

Clerks worked in the service industry. Most did not physically produce goods but either provided services which facilitated the production of goods, via the provision of finance, trade, transport, costing, purchasing, distribution and increasingly marketing and advertising, or providing services directly to the public, as in transport or local government.

Ideas of service amongst clerks gradually changed in the latter half of the nineteenth century. A clerk's sense of service had earlier derived from his relatively close relationship with his employers. Clerks as commercial servants faithfully served their masters. Satisfaction was derived from providing personal, loyal service. The interests of the master and the business house were tightly related in the clerk's mind to his own interests and the service which he provided.<sup>12</sup>

With the closer integration of the national economy in the latter half of the nineteenth century, with the increasing dependency of industry on services such as the railways or the financial and commercial houses and exchanges of London, ideas of service became more associated with the work clerks provided for the well being of the general public, nation and Empire rather than any one individual or company. Herein lies part of the reason for the deep patriotism that clerks were noted for.<sup>13</sup> Clerks

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<sup>12</sup> See Holcombe, Victorian Ladies at Work, p. 149.

<sup>13</sup> See Richard N. Price, 'Society, Status and Jingoism: The Social Roots of Lower Middle Class Patriotism' in Geoffrey Crossick (ed.), The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870-1914, (London: Croom Helm, 1977).

readily identified themselves with the Mother Country and Empire because they felt that their labours were tied up with its interests.<sup>14</sup> This process was further assisted by the growth in the scale of offices and break down in personal ties between employer and clerk. Similarly with the growth of national and local government, public officials gradually became more involved with the community at large in the services which they provided for it.<sup>15</sup>

Such a sense of public service can be seen in two quotes from staff magazines read by clerical workers. The first comes from the London County Council Staff Gazette,

... every young officer during the first year of service, should be given facilities for visiting all the Council's works. He should see the mighty engines of our pumping station; he should be brought face to face with the practical working out of the gigantic drainage problem, he should see the fleet of steamers that day and night toil to and from the sea that London may maintain her reputation as the healthiest city of the world's great cities, he should see the great ferry and burrowing tunnel which unite the populations on either side of the Lower Thames. He should see the Chemists in their laboratory, the examiners at the gas-testing stations, the workshops of the Works Departments, the blocks of artisan's dwellings that have displaced reeking slums, the wonderful organisation for dealing with fires, for it is only

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<sup>14</sup> See Jonathon Schneer, London 1900 The Imperial Metropolis, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), Chapter 4.

<sup>15</sup> See John Davis, 'The Progressive Council, 1889-1907' in Andrew Saint (ed.), The London County Council 1889-1965, (London: The Hambledon Press, 1989)

when he has seen all these that the young official can realise the greatness and the importance of the vast organisation in which he is to become a factor.<sup>16</sup>

The second comes from the Great Eastern Railway Magazine, and describes the functions of the Bishopsgate Goods Station, located in Shoreditch, on the parameters of the City of London,

Situated in busy Shoreditch, its proximity to the docks, wharves, markets and great City warehouses, places Bishopsgate in an exceptional position for dealing with no inconsiderable proportion of the carrying trade of London.

...As London is the great distributing centre of the world, so Bishopsgate in its outward traffic reflects the nature of the business of the capital of the Empire.

The goods despatched are cosmopolitan in character and go not only to the Company's own line, but to the Midlands, the North, and the Continent.<sup>17</sup>

Both these quotes illustrate the pride that was felt in working for these concerns, and in the services they provided. In the first, the very health of London was guaranteed by the work of the L.C.C., in the second it was the trade and welfare of not only the capital, but of the Empire itself. In both examples the service aspects of these organisations was emphasised.

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<sup>16</sup> The L.C.C. Staff Gazette, February, 1900, p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> The Great Eastern Railway Magazine, July, 1911, pp. 213-4.

## Professionalism

Many clerks took active pride in their work. The Office, for example, in 1889 wrote, 'An office occupied by highly qualified, active, intelligent men is as certain to be the centre of a progressive and successful business, as one occupied by incompetent men will assuredly prove the reverse...'.<sup>18</sup> The success of an office was thus dependent on the degree of professionalism that individuals applied to their work.<sup>19</sup> This in turn was a reflection of the competency of the men selected to work in the office. The L.C.C. Staff Gazette, for example, often referred to the officials of the L.C.C. as 'men of intelligence and ability', qualities which were seen as essential for the effective execution of the duties of the officials of the Council.<sup>20</sup>

When asked if his father had felt dissatisfied or bored with his work at the London, County and Westminster Bank, Jim Hancock answered, 'No, I don't think so at all, I think he had a great interest in detail, in accuracy, and I think he would always have been very conscientious about whatever task, or whatever position he was in during his career.'<sup>21</sup> These qualities which Jim listed, attention to detail, accuracy and conscientiousness were seen as the essential qualities which a clerk needed.<sup>22</sup> In addition, in an age when most clerical tasks were still done by hand and brain, these were required characteristics of his work. In many respects, the craft of the clerical

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<sup>18</sup> The Office, May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1889, p. 101.

<sup>19</sup> See Harold Perkin, The Rise of Professional Society. England Since 1880, (London: Routledge, 1989)

<sup>20</sup> See The London County Council Staff Gazette, January 1914, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Jim Hancock at his home, November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

<sup>22</sup> See BANKER, The Bankers Clerk, (London: Houlston and Sons, 1877), pp. 127-9.

worker, the ability to write in a legible script, to compose letters and documents which were grammatically accurate, to rapidly add up rows of figures and perform complex mathematical calculations, was no different in terms of its exclusivity and status from the skill of an artisan.<sup>23</sup> Clerks, like skilled workers, took great pride in the accuracy and tidiness of what they produced. These were qualities which were often commented on when a clerk left the employment of an office or passed away. When Rodney C. Baker, for example, retired from The Prudential in 1918 after 44 years he was applauded for not being absent at any time during his duties, nor having infringed any of the regulations of the Company. Baker had been a member of the staff of L-Claim, a department whose motto was 'Nothing Second Rate'.<sup>24</sup>

One important aspect of commitment was attending evening courses to improve their clerical skills and further their education. Laurence Gomme, for example, Clerk of the London County Council wrote in 1900 that officers of the L.C.C. should look at themselves as much as students as officials. 'A clerk', he argued, 'is a better clerk if he copies a report or letter not only correctly and neatly, but with a full knowledge of the subject matter, and a professional officer is doubly important if, besides being a specialist in his own profession, he knows some of the influences which have produced his work and which his work is in turn likely to produce'.<sup>25</sup>

Shorthand, bookkeeping, and foreign languages were just three of the many subjects that clerks studied after office hours. In August, 1903, for example, Sydney Moseley began to attend night school. In March of the following year he entered for the

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<sup>23</sup> See F.B. Crouch, *From School to Office*, (London: Effingham Wilson & Co., 1890), Chapter 1. See also Haslehurst Greaves, *The Commercial Clerk and His Success*, (London: Cassell & Co., 1909), Chapter 1.

<sup>24</sup> Archives of Prudential Plc MS – 1292, 'Life Claim Department papers'

<sup>25</sup> *The L.C.C. Staff Gazette*, January, 1900, p. 4.

Chamber of Commerce Shorthand examination, and for the National Union of Teachers Book-keeping qualification.<sup>26</sup> Much of this was due to the strong self-help and self-improvement ethics found amongst clerks. Attending such courses improved ones chances of promotion. For many, they were essential skills for the duties of the modern clerk. Yet all of these factors need to be seen in the light of the clerk's professional commitment to his work. As 'brain-workers' clerks were expected to improve their education. In addition to evening courses, such commitment could take other forms outside working hours. The article referred to earlier on 'The Education of a Goods Clerk', encouraged its readers to read newspapers, magazines, even the advertising columns of trade journals. Exhibitions were seen as sound sources of education, as were visits to factories or simply the intelligent scanning of a shop window. On December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1904, for example, George Rose, went to a Gas Exhibition where he saw, '...a good many of my fellow clerks.'<sup>27</sup> Daniel McEwen, wrote a book on bankruptcy accounts which was subsequently published in 1889. He was quick, on its publication, to send a copy to his most senior superior, the Inspector General.<sup>28</sup>

## Character

In February, 1900, an article in the L.C.C. Staff Gazette, entitled, 'Advice written by one with thirty years official experience to Juniors', stated, '...it is important to bear in mind that in most branches of the Council's work character is at least as important, and is as much looked for as ability.'<sup>29</sup> The argument was a well rehearsed one. T.E.

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<sup>26</sup> The Private Diaries of Sydney Moseley, (London: Max Parish, 1960) p. 3 & p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> Essex Records Office, D/DU 4/8/1, 'The Diaries of George Rose', December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1904,

<sup>28</sup> London Borough of Southwark Archives, 'The Diary of Daniel McEwen', January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1890.

<sup>29</sup> The L.C.C. Staff Gazette, February, 1900, p. 19.

Young, ex-President of the Institute of Actuaries and ex-Chairman of the Life Office's Association, argued in 1904, in slightly more convoluted terms,

...High character, especially in those occupying the more responsible posts, is worth much intellectual adroitness, since by the tone and temper with which it pervades an assembly of boys and men of different dispositions, varied accessibility to diverse temptations, and inequalities of moral strength, it exercises a purifying influence and adds conspicuously to the order, discipline, and effectiveness of the entire staff.<sup>30</sup>

Speaking nearly a hundred years later Jim Hancock, retired, but still doing work in the archives of the Royal Bank of Scotland, noted,

Doing my work at the archives at the moment, transferring historical information of the Staff Magazines of the various constituency banks to the computer data base, I've come across this impression that you were dealing with men, and later women, of course, coming into the bank, of the highest integrity. I can't emphasise that enough. They were quite remarkable men and women.<sup>31</sup>

The importance of character had much to do with Victorian values of manliness which had been so assiduously cultivated in the Public Schools, and had been extolled

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<sup>30</sup> T.E. Young and Richard Masters, Insurance Office Organisation, Management and Accounts, (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, Ltd, 1904), pp. 20-21.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Jim Hancock.

by public figures from William Gladstone to Samuel Smiles.<sup>32</sup> A man's true value lay in his inner worth, in his integrity, his honesty, his assiduity, his desire for self-improvement and his sense of loyalty and duty.<sup>33</sup> The sum product of this was seen as his character. Asked, for example, what he meant by 'integrity', Jim answered, 'Total honesty, trustworthy, the way they conducted themselves. People whom you had the highest respect for.'<sup>34</sup> Success in one's work and by extension in worldly terms lay in applying one's character to one's labour and ones dealing with other men.<sup>35</sup>

Character was seen as important to a clerk's success for several reasons. One was the support it gave in ones drive for self-improvement, for the getting of knowledge which was regarded as so important for a clerk's success. In addition to this was the whole question of honesty and trustworthiness. Clerical workers were often responsible for handling large amounts of money and dealing with confidential information. It was therefore vital that they could be trusted.<sup>36</sup> A clerk's promotion, for example, and annual salary increment was often seen as an indication of his employer's trust in him, and was thus the source of great pride. George Rose, for instance, wrote of his 'public disgrace in the office' in January, 1902, at only having been given a £5 pay increase.<sup>37</sup> With the increase in size in many offices, and the break down in personal relations which this entailed, this need for trust, and men of high character, became correspondingly greater.

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<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of Victorian Manliness see John Tosh, 'What Should Historians do with Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth Century Britain', in History Workshop, 1994, 38, 179-202. See also Tosh, A Man's Place. Masculinity and the Middle Class Home in Victorian England, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1999)

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of the importance of character to Victorian society and its morals see Stefan Collini, Public Moralists, Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850-1930, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), Chapter 3.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> See The Railway Clerk, August, 1904, p. 87.

<sup>36</sup> See The Bankers Clerk, p. 133.

<sup>37</sup> 'The Diaries of George Rose', January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1903.



Character was felt to be important for promotion in other respects. There was seen to be a relationship between the depth of one's character and the amount of work that one could be responsible for. This was felt to be especially important when clerks began to become responsible for other clerks. T.E. Young, for example, argued,

...in every promotion the element of moral character should be assigned a dominating place. No ability can atone in the fulfilment of duty and trust for deficiency of high principles. Both in the selection of candidates, and particularly in their appointment to higher ranks where their influence will be materially widened and more pervasive, this consideration is of primal consequence.<sup>38</sup>

Mr W.A. Webb, for example, a second class assistant in the General Construction Section of the Architects Department of the L.C.C was passed over twice for promotion in 1897 and 1898. In a memorandum stating his reasons, The Architect, the head of Webb's department wrote, '...he is well conducted and well intended but has not so far shown the ability to take entire responsibility, and to supervise others as in the case of other officials.'<sup>39</sup>

Finally, in such a highly individualistic era, it was felt that the character of each individual member of a company represented the total character of the organisation itself. This belief has been seen in The Office's argument in which a successful

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<sup>38</sup> T.E. Young and Richard Masters, Insurance Office Organisation, Management and Accounts, p. 26.

<sup>39</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, LCC/MIN/4633, 'LCC Establishment Committee Papers, 1898'.

company could only emerge if it were filled with competent men. 'The character of the employees in an office', the article argued, 'is in fact one of the most prominent indications of the nature of the business in which they are engaged'.<sup>40</sup> In anatomical terms T.E. Young argued, '...the character or nature of the units or parts of which the organism is composed determines the character or nature of the aggregate when the units are associated for any specific end'.<sup>41</sup> The equation was simple. The more character your staff had, the more successful your organisation. The emphasis, therefore, became to attract as many men of high character as possible.

It was in this context that the importance attached to sport at the workplace can partially be located. Since the mid-nineteenth century sport had been seen as character building.<sup>42</sup> It built up strength, induced discipline, developed team work and increased ones endurance. The more sport one did, it was assumed, the more character and manliness one developed. This in turn, was seen to result in the office and wider organisation one worked for becoming more successful. T.E. Young argued regarding this, 'It need scarcely be remarked that the institution of athletic sports among the staff serves as a most helpful agency of union and stimulus. No more accredited aid to the promotion of moral character... can be devised than innocent, healthful relaxations...'.<sup>43</sup>

## **Esprit de Corps**

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<sup>40</sup> The Office, May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1889, p. 101.

<sup>41</sup> Young and Masters, Insurance Office Organisation, p. 10.

<sup>42</sup> See speech of Mr. Dickenson, Chairman of the London County Council in The London County Council Gazette, July, 1900, p. 77. See also J.A. Managan, Athleticism in the Edwardian Public School: The Emergence and Consolidation of an Edwardian Ideology, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981)

<sup>43</sup> Insurance Office Organisation, p. 46.

As offices and departments became larger and more impersonalised management became increasingly faced with the problem of how to weld all their personnel together into one unified working group. It has already been seen in the previous chapter how in terms of practical working conditions this was attempted by introducing a more rigorous discipline in the office, particularly among the younger members of staff. In addition, management were faced by the further problem of creating in their members of staff the feeling that they were members of a company, individuals who shared something in common, and were not simply cogs in the wheel of some lumbering bureaucracy.

This sense of belonging, of being part of a greater family, was created as has been argued earlier, by means of corporate patronage and introducing ideas of company loyalty. Clerks increasingly associated themselves not with the person they worked for, but rather with the organisation. A sense of corporate identity developed, especially for those in larger offices. The evidence suggests that there were strong associations between clerks and their places of work, reinforced, by the long periods that clerks often stayed with a company or office. George Rose, for example, hated being a clerk and dreamed of being an artist.<sup>44</sup> Despite this, however, Rose's diary is full of reference to the office he worked in at the Commercial Gas Company, of the politics of the office, of his position within it and of the colleagues he worked with. Such sentiments also did not prevent him from attending the social activities of his office.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> 'George Rose Diaries', January 6<sup>th</sup>, 1906

<sup>45</sup> See, for example *ibid.*, July 12<sup>th</sup>, 1902.

Frank H.H. King has also noted, in relation to the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, that as the organisation grew larger, in addition to the establishment of a more rigid system of discipline, a vertical familiarity was replaced by a greater knowledge of ones peers.<sup>46</sup> Put more simply, as companies grew larger there were increased opportunities to form friendships with individuals of a similar age. Such friendships with colleagues from work seem to have been strong amongst clerks, many reinforced by the existence of sporting clubs and other social activities associated with work, and appear to have been an important element of their professional life. When he began work for the Civil Service at Somerset House in 1910, Alfred Henry Pyle was able to meet men of his own age whom he lunched with and socialised in London. Friendships were also formed with individuals he met on his daily commute up to London.<sup>47</sup> Jim Hancock believed that the most valued thing his father had derived from working at the Westminster Bank for over forty years was the colleagues whom he had met there and formed life long friendships with.<sup>48</sup> Esprit de Corps was therefore seen not only as the degree to which one associated with ones company, but also the extent to which one was able to get on with one's colleagues, both during and after office hours. Being part of a team was clearly an important element in a clerk's working life.

## London

The clerks of this study not only worked for companies, individuals and government. They also worked in London, then the largest city in the world, Imperial Capital of

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<sup>46</sup> Frank H.H. King, *The History of the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Vol. I*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 574.

<sup>47</sup> British Libray, *Paul Thompson and Thea Vigne Interviews, Family Life and Work Experience before 1918*, QD1/FLWE/63, 'Alfred Henry Pyle'.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Jim Hancock

Britain and its Empire, and hub of the world's trading and financial system. This was something all clerks knew and regarded with pride. Such a feeling was articulated by W. Howarth in 1900 in his work on Britain's banking system,

Without a doubt, London is the greatest centre of industry in the world. In it one can see trades and professions of every kind, manufactories, institutions, industries, &c., in fact, everything ...can be procured in that monstrous overgrowth of warehouses, offices, shops and buildings of all sorts...London with its population of nearly six millions; London with its stupendous public buildings, with its magnificent cathedral, with its numerous and excellent institutions; London, the capital of one of the greatest Powers of modern times; and most assuredly the capital of a country whose dominion extends from pole to pole; London, with its perfection of organisation, its unequalled civic law without a question does business of a gigantic character and of dimensions unknown to any but itself. Its financial institutions, its banking art and science – for banking unites the taste of one with the dignity of the other – are now unrivalled in the civilised world.<sup>49</sup>

Size clearly did matter. Despite the hyperbole of much of Howarth's language there was also some truth in what he wrote. In 1914 no city rivalled London in terms of its commercial and financial strength. In addition, it was a major centre of industry, the professions, and retailing, besides being the national seat of government. Clerks were very much a part of all of this. As the County Magazine stated in 1909, for example,

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<sup>49</sup> W. Howarth, Our Banking System and Clearing Houses, (London: Effingham Wilson, 1907), pp. 27-8.

the London Banks were, ‘... a representative of the most important business community in the greatest city in the world.’<sup>50</sup>

Nowhere can the sense of pride be seen better than in the term ‘City Man’. The term applied to those who carried out office work in the City of London, from the Head of the Bank of England to the lowliest clerk.<sup>51</sup> Widely used in this period, it can be found in newspapers, journals, novels, speeches, and even diaries and was clearly a term which carried much kudos and status. For The Ilford Guardian, the local newspaper of a growing London suburb, mainly populated by office workers and their families, the City Men were the cream of the town. At a celebratory meal for the opening of the new Town Hall at Ilford the paper reported Councillor Henry Weeden’s speech in which he stated, ‘...Their townsmen were nearly all City men. They had to work extremely hard during the day and would like to see more social life in the town without having to go to the West End of London for it.’<sup>52</sup> In fact, less than half of Ilford’s male inhabitants would probably have commuted to the City at that point, but of course Weeden was talking about the men who mattered, and in this he was not contradicted by the local paper. In 1911 the official promotional brochure of Ilford, written by its local council, repeated Weeden’s sentiments, ‘...Ilford was created by the city worker for the city worker, and it is a model of what a residential locality should be for the professional and commercial class’.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The County Magazine, 1909, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> See Shneer, London 1900, Chapter 4.

<sup>52</sup> Ilford Guardian, March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1900

<sup>53</sup> London Borough of Redbridge Library, Ilford, Including Seven Kings and Goodmayes, The Official Publication of the Urban District Council, 1911

By 1914 City workers had created a particularly strong occupational and regional sense of identity. On February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1913, for example, George Rose moved yet again to another set of rooms in South Hampstead. His diary entry for that day read,

I left the office at Midday today to get on with the moving. We had interviewed four or five women for to choose a house keeper last night, much to the amusement of the trades people in Kings College Road through which we are becoming notorious in the immediate neighbourhood. They tell the servants and the servants tell their mistresses of the two bachelors (Citymen) about to set up housekeeping in a flat. But we are thinking that the girls will not stand the devil of a chance now we are getting so independent and I have observed recently one living opposite showing a very interested face at the windows.<sup>54</sup>

When Rose used the term 'Citymen' to refer to himself and his flatmate Duncan (a stockbroker's clerk), he was identifying himself with a larger collective. While most clerks would have had some form of occupational identity in this period, identifying themselves to some degree with their place of work, those who worked in the City shared a supra-corporate identity. The dress codes of the City, the obligatory wearing of straw hats in the summer, for example, expressed this.<sup>55</sup> It was one which its holders appear to have adopted with pride, dignity and satisfaction.

## Promotion

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<sup>54</sup> 'The Diary of George Rose', February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1913.

<sup>55</sup> See The County Magazine, 1907, Vol. 1., p. 15.

Next to security, promotion (including salary increases) was the most important aspect of a clerk's job. Its centrality cannot be exaggerated. Clerks wrote memorials about it, they sent petitions to superiors and letters to newspapers about it.<sup>56</sup> They composed poems over it, mused about it in their diaries, wrote short stories and even novels on it.<sup>57</sup> The work 69 Birnam Road, for example, written by William Pett Ridge, a former clerk, and widely read by clerical workers and their families, revolves around the gradual promotion of Fred, the husband of the main character Ella, from railway clerk to Superintendent of the Line.<sup>58</sup> In writing such a novel Ridge was articulating the dreams and aspirations of many of his readers.

Promotion was important for several reasons. Firstly, it meant more money for the clerks and increased security. For married officials with families this was crucial. The poem 'On Salary', for example, written by 'Piper', clerical official and poet of the L.C.C. Staff Gazette, showed the importance of promotion and salary increases to the married clerk. In the poem the author addressed a letter to his chief asking for promotion and a salary rise, a yearly ritual for most clerks. In the first three stanzas he wrote,

I sent a letter to the chief  
And said 'It passes all belief  
How many noble things I do  
For such a mediocre screw.

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<sup>56</sup> National Archives RAIL 258/400 'Great Western Railway Clerical Staff: recruiting, examination of, 1877-1914'.

<sup>57</sup> See 'George Rose', January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1907. See also 'Civil Service Sketches No. 2 Promoted' in Red Tape, November, 1911, pp. 4-5.

<sup>58</sup> William Pett Ridge, 69 Birnam Road, (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1908)



Enclosed are portraits of my twins  
(how sleek and pink their baby skins)  
'Two bring the tear drops to your eyes  
To hear them lisp, 'Where's puppa's rise?

I told them what it cost for coals  
How little socks contracted holes  
What Hannah spent in frocks and frill  
And what we paid in Butchers Bills.<sup>59</sup>

A higher income was not only of economic significance for officials, but it was also of social value, particularly for a group who were as socially competitive as clerical workers.<sup>60</sup> Higher paid clerks could live in larger houses, in 'better' areas, go on more luxurious holidays, join more affluent social and sporting clubs, keep their children in school for longer at more prestigious schools. For fathers among the staff, usually as sole breadwinners in the household, this led to a reinforcing of their prestige and position within the household.<sup>61</sup>

Promotion also meant increased status. Clerical work was extremely hierarchical. Clerks were often divided into classes with juniors and office boys below them, and special officers, chief clerks and managers above this. Everything in the office, from one's salary, to the work one was responsible for, to very often, one's position in the sporting and social clubs was a reflection of this. Offices in this period appear to have

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<sup>59</sup> The L.C.C. Staff Gazette, February, 1914, p. 31.

<sup>60</sup> See Ridge, 69 Birnam Road. See also Geoffrey Crossick, 'The Emergence of the Lower Middle Class in Britain', in Crossick (ed.), The Lower Middle Class, p. 31.

<sup>61</sup> See 'Civil Service Sketches No. 5 – Marriage' in Red Tape, February, 1912, pp. 6-7.

been every bit as political as they are today. George Rose's diary, for example, is full of the machinations of power within the office where he worked. On December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1905, for instance, he wrote, 'Heard from Edwin that Freeman is deposed. H. Parr is to be head of the office and Edwin to go upstairs and assist Bradfield the head accountant. So there is 'boulversement.' Of course I do not expect any advancement. I believe when they look my way the thought which arises is of Art (Art as a plaything they mean) and certainly not of a responsible business man'.<sup>62</sup> On January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1906, his diary entry concluded the saga of the hapless Freeman, 'Small groups cluster at intervals about the office today, gleeful on two subjects: the rises and G. Freeman's dismissal. He came up today and was 'sacked'. It must be like a nightmare to him after the amount of influence he had at the office.'<sup>63</sup>

Finally, promotion was an indication of the degree of attainment of the other qualities listed above. How professional one was, how devout one was in serving the company and its broader clientele, how well one worked with ones colleagues and associated oneself with the organisation one worked for, and most importantly, the depth of ones character, were all reflected in the extent of an individual's ability to climb up the office ladder. Promotion was seen as the reward for merit and ability. It was the ultimate mark of success. As a result of this, the disappointment that some clerks displayed at failing to obtain promotion was profound and deeply personal. George Rose's public humiliation in the office at failing to achieve a large pay increase has already been seen. W.A. Webb, the Second Class Assistant in the General Construction Section of the Architects department was so incensed at being passed over twice for promotion that he wrote to the newspaper, The Echo, about it which

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<sup>62</sup> 'Diaries of George Rose', December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1905

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1906

resulted in a large article being written in 1898 on staff grievances at the L.C.C.<sup>64</sup> At Glyn's Bank in October, 1902, Clerk R was 'allowed to resign' because he had been passed over in favour of another clerk.<sup>65</sup>

The weight that was given by clerks to promotion can be illustrated by the reaction of the officials of the Major Establishment at the L.C.C. when changes were made to the classification system of the grade by the Council between 1908 and 1909. Before these dates officers at the L.C.C. had been divided into four classes. It had been assumed that any officer of average or above ability would be able to proceed through his career through all four classes, arriving at a final salary of £300. A Standing Order of 1909 changed all of this. Promotion to the first class, would now only take place if a vacancy became available, or if the extension of work merited such a promotion. Promotion to the senior grades was now fixed. What became known as the £200 barrier, the highest salary one could reach as a second class official, had been created.<sup>66</sup>

The news of this proposal in December 1908 was said to have sent a shock wave through the staff. As C.D. Andrews and G.C. Burge wrote fifty years later in the half-centenary anniversary of the L.C.C. Staff Association, 'To most of the Staff this was the grossest betrayal.'<sup>67</sup> The Council was felt to have reneged on its promises to the Staff. More importantly, the act contested the hallowed belief that merit should be the principle criteria for promotion. By creating the barrier, it was argued, artificial obstacles were being erected to impede progression. Spontaneous agitation against the

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<sup>64</sup> L.C.C. Establishment Committee Papers, 14<sup>th</sup> July, 1898.

<sup>65</sup> RBSG Archives GB 1502/ GM/339/1 'Glyn's clerks register 1864-1918'

<sup>66</sup> See London Metropolitan Archives, Andrews, C.D. and G.C. Burge, Progress Report, 1909-1959. The First Fifty Years in the History of the L.C.C. Staff Association, Privately Published,

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

proposals quickly took place. On December 18, 1908, 600 Staff assembled in Birkbeck College. By 1909, the L.C.C. Staff Association had been formed to protect the interests of the officials of the Council and to protest as a group against the imposition of the £200 barrier. Though strictly speaking not a formal trade union, the Association marked a turning point in the history of the officials of the L.C.C.. For the first time officials negotiated collectively rather than individually with the Council in relation to their terms of employment. Staff relations would never be the same again.

An important article on the subject appeared in the Gazette in February 1914. This was the month that promotion and pay increases were announced, and thus awakened a sense of grievance in the staff to the changes of five years earlier. The staff's sense of outrage and disappointment was as acute as it had been in 1909. Starting from the argument that it was wrong for the Council to fix men's salaries at £200 during a period of rising prices, the article went on to depict the Staff's sense of betrayal at the Council's actions, and its implications for their professional lives. '...human nature', the article argued, '...can understand that financial considerations may prevent a capable and deserving officer from receiving an increase of salary. It is more difficult, however, to appreciate the point of view which denies an outlet to a man's ability because having devoted himself to his duties from an early age he is compelled ever more to be classified in a certain way.'<sup>68</sup> Citing the examples of 'distinguished administrators such as Sir Laurence Gomme, the Clerk of the Council, and Sir M.E. Haward, its Comptroller, both of whom had risen through the ranks, the article went on to argue, '...The Staff is inspired by such examples and naturally is anxious that

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<sup>68</sup> The L.C.C. Staff Gazette, February, 1914, p. 32.

the great field of achievement that lay before the servants of the Council years ago, shall be open to the men of today, provided they in turn prove their worth.’<sup>69</sup>

This article, and the entire debate at the L.C.C. between 1909 and 1914 concerning the ‘£200 Barrier’ was instructive in relation to the clerk’s attitude to promotion.

While financial concerns were always paramount in a clerk’s mind there were also important ideological considerations. Promotion was the reward for a man’s ability and faithful duty at work. It was a direct reflection of his inner character and merit. The basis of its legitimacy was guaranteed by the precedents of the Senior members of Staff. There was a belief that its working was almost natural. The sense of betrayal thus expressed came not only from a breach of trust, but also from a feeling that the whole working of the professional nexus of a clerk’s life, the virtuous circle of merit, work, promotion was being grievously broken. It was an argument which was often repeated in disputes between clerks and employees, and illustrates the centrality of promotion, both in terms of material reward and ideology, to a clerk’s working life.<sup>70</sup>

## **Work and Satisfaction**

To what extent did clerks in London derive job satisfaction from the duties they carried out? For a group of individuals who would often devote forty five years of their life to clerical work the question is clearly an important one. No attempt here will be given to provide a definitive answer. The numbers of individuals concerned were too large, their tasks too varied. Nevertheless, the question can be discussed and suggestions offered. The degree of satisfaction of clerks with their work would

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> See Red Tape, July, 1912, p. 6.

obviously have had an impact on the actions and attitudes of these individuals, both at work and outside of it.

The general agreement in the literature was that clerks were anything but satisfied.

Braverman's depiction of the clerk's increasing anomie has already been seen.

Anderson's portrayal is of a group of men hopelessly fighting the tide of history, swamped by the vicissitudes of unemployment, falling incomes, women, foreigners, technology and youths, and generally not content with their professional lives.<sup>71</sup> Paul Attewell begins his article on clerks by arguing that not only were clerks dissatisfied with their work after 1870, but that they had never been satisfied! An extensive barrage of quotes is directed at the reader to force through this point from individuals such as Charles Lamb to anonymous contributors to contemporary journals.<sup>72</sup>

Many of these arguments were reflected in, and based on, the contemporary literature of the day referred to earlier. Newspaper articles, poems, novels and even songs depicted clerks who were thoroughly disillusioned with their work and life in general. 'The daily paper', The County Magazine wrote in 1907, 'is becoming a terror to us, for fear it may contain yet another article by a self-appointed champion of our cause'.<sup>73</sup>

This last quote reveals the weaknesses of many of the arguments made above. Much of the case has been made on the basis of a selective and uncritical reading of sources. Many of these articles and poems were written by individuals who were not clerks and were writing more with an eye to their readership than to a desire to depict with

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<sup>71</sup> Gregory Anderson, Victorian Clerks, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976)

<sup>72</sup> Paul Attewell, 'The Clerk Deskilled'

<sup>73</sup> The County Magazine, 1907, p. 15.

objective accuracy what was actually taking place. This can be seen in the case of W.A. Webb, the official at the L.C.C. who had been passed over for promotion. As a result of writing a letter to The Echo, stating his own personal grievances, the newspaper produced an article which depicted the entire Staff of the L.C.C. in a state of near anarchy and revolution. Here was a classic example of the grievances of an individual being inflated by an unscrupulous journalist to represent the feelings of the majority.<sup>74</sup>

How representative such criticisms were must also be treated with a degree of scepticism. This is for several reasons. The first is that while some of these writers were former clerks, they had been so for only relatively short periods. There was a strong tendency to depict in extremely hostile terms the agonies which they went through when they had been chained to the desk of some god forsaken office. 'The extreme of active misery' wrote George Rose in 1909, a man who clearly associated himself with these literary greats, 'I suffer from contact with my fellow clerks seems insupportable. Imagine the bulk of a man made up of and consisting of vile, gangrenous putrefying concretions of slugs, worms, eels and rats and you will realise a little of what some of these men are to me'.<sup>75</sup>

The author George Bernard Shaw wrote a series of articles about his own experience as a clerk for The Clerk, at the beginning of 1909. Shaw had been a clerk in Dublin for four and a half years, and left the field before he was twenty. Writing in March, 1908, he stated, concerning the clerical worker:

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<sup>74</sup> L.C.C. Establishment Committee Papers, 14<sup>th</sup> July, 1898.

<sup>75</sup> 'George Rose', March 29<sup>th</sup>, 1909.

...I have sometimes wondered whether clerks perform any useful function in the general scheme of the universe...his work is either a hopeless routine which he does not understand, he too often knows it to be work that had better not be done at all. He is more than any worker, the instrument of greed, chicanery, and parasitism...The clerk too often produces nothing but the incidental cheating.<sup>76</sup>

This quote was typical of attacks by writers who had been former clerks. Taken at face value, they are a damning condemnation of the entire clerical profession and put to flight any suggestion that clerks were satisfied with their professional lot in life. Though emphasising his experience as a clerk, however, there were clearly limits on the insights that even a man as gifted as Shaw, and others like him, could have gained into the entire clerical profession as a teenager working in an office in Dublin for such a brief period. This argument is repeated in David King's critique of P.G. Wodehouse who had lampooned the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank and the workings of the City in his satirical novel Psmith in The City. Wodehouse, like Shaw, had worked as a clerk. Like Shaw, however, he had only done so as a teenager for several years.

'Wodehouse', King argues, '- and others like him – neither understanding its [the work they carried out] purpose at the time nor willing to wait until much had become clear, was not in a position to evaluate the consequences of the routine jobs he and his colleagues were required to perform.'<sup>77</sup> Individuals like Shaw and Wodehouse often criticised clerical workers for carrying out work, the purpose of which they had no idea. Such writers' criticisms, while providing amusing and sometimes original

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<sup>76</sup> The Clerk, March, 1908, p. 35.

<sup>77</sup> Frank H.H. King, The History of the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Vol. II., p. 182.



insights, should consequently be treated with caution when historically discussing clerical workers.

In addition to newspapers and writers, historians have often turned to clerical journals to demonstrate clerical worker's dissatisfaction. Again, there are serious grounds to question the general applicability of these sources. Many journals, such as The Clerk and The Railway Clerk, were the magazines of clerical trade unions and associations whose very purpose was to articulate the misery of the black coated worker. The Clerk, for example, wrote in its first edition in 1908, 'Our Journal and our Union will grow together. The experience of the past eighteen months has proved what possibilities open up as soon as time, energy and esprit de corps are given to propaganda and organisation in the whole-hearted manner which we have seen lately.'<sup>78</sup> One could hardly expect anything other than general criticism from a press whose purpose was to criticise. One could equally, for example, turn to company journals, such as The County Magazine, to prove how wonderfully happy and contented clerks were. There are clearly limitations in the use of both forms of literature when attempting to evaluate a clerk's satisfaction with their work.

A final source of criticism which historians have looked at are the petitions and memorials which clerical workers periodically sent to superiors. If clerks had a grievance at work they would petition their employers, asking for the situation to be ameliorated. As the nineteenth century progressed, it became increasingly typical for clerks, especially in larger offices, to send joint petitions. In the case of an organisation such as the Great Western Railway, for example, such petitions could be

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<sup>78</sup> The Clerk, January, 1908, p. 6.

signed by several thousand clerks. Such petitions could be seen as proof of clerical dissatisfaction with work.<sup>79</sup> There are, however, two problems with this. The first is that they were a traditional method of employer/employee relations. Rather than negotiate directly with their superiors, clerks were forced to write down problems which they felt needed to be resolved. The result was a particularly negative system of arbitration which on the surface made it appear that clerks were constantly racked with dissent and antagonism towards their employers. The reluctance of the latter group, up until 1914, to discuss regularly issues which concerned clerks at work exacerbated this. The second problem is that the petition tended to exaggerate grievances. If the situation was felt to be serious enough clerks would be granted a meeting to discuss the issue, or even have some of their demands met. It was therefore in the clerk's interest to amplify their complaint(s) as much as possible. The Whitley Council set up after the First World War, went some way to resolve these problems by encouraging more negotiation between Staff and employers. Before 1914, for example, clerical trade unions and associations in the Civil Service had argued, 'that a formal negotiating procedure should be established together with the facilities for conciliation and arbitration.'<sup>80</sup> It was the lack of such a negotiating procedure amongst clerical workers, and the exaggerated claims that this encouraged, that should make the historian extra-careful when looking at such material.

There are therefore strong grounds to question the traditional belief that clerks were dissatisfied with their work. This is not to argue that all clerks were blissfully happy or to argue that there did not exist any who were not. The evidence shows a wide variety of responses to work. It is only to question how representative these criticisms

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<sup>79</sup> National Archives RAIL 258/400, 'Great Western Railway Clerical Staff'

<sup>80</sup> Jill Pellew, The Home Office 1848-1914, (London: Heinemann, 1982), p. 117.

were and to what extent they accurately depicted clerical grievances. Perhaps the most effective and simple argument against such claims is one usually complains when one has a grievance but remains quiet when one is content. Detecting evidence of clerical dissatisfaction is not the same thing as saying that all clerks were dissatisfied.

Evidence from the diaries and interview supports these arguments. George Rose and Sydney Moseley were certainly not content with their professional lot in life. Yet the latter left the clerical profession to become a journalist and the former considered himself to be an artist who used clerical work, which he felt to be below him, to support his art work. Rose, indeed, was typical of that class of clerk who Haslehurst Greaves, a life time clerk, described as not being adapted to their calling, ‘...they have missed their vocation in life.’, Greaves commented, ‘Their hearts and minds are elsewhere, they should have been engineers or actors, doctors or lawyers, but force of circumstances has chained them to a desk...’<sup>81</sup>. Both clerks, while typical of a certain class of clerical worker, were not typical of the majority who remained in offices for their working lives. Diarists such as William Evans or Daniel McEwen, never raved nor complained about their work. It was a subject they never touched in their diaries. Similarly the majority of clerks interviewed expressed either satisfaction with their work or a lack of frustration with it. The same tendency was repeated when they spoke of their parents who had been clerks. Only one former clerk, Geoffrey Rogers, stated he wished he had had a different kind of occupation.<sup>82</sup> Rogers had had no say in the type of labour he would perform. This decision had been taken by his parents, and

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<sup>81</sup> Haslehurst Greaves, *The Commercial Clerk and His Success*, p. 11.

<sup>82</sup> Paul Thompson and Thea Vigne Interviews, QD1/FLWE/161, ‘Geoffrey Rogers’.

he himself, years later, stated he would have preferred to have done a more manual job such as carpenting for example.

Clearly this is not to say that all clerks were satisfied with their work. There were clerks who were not suited to clerical work and left the profession. There were others who remained silent and simply put up with the work. It would be wrong, however, to use these as representative examples. Clerical registers show the overwhelming majority of clerks as remaining with their organisations or moving to join other offices as clerical workers.<sup>83</sup> Most clerks remained as clerks. Evidence from diaries and oral sources indicates that there was some degree of satisfaction. What should one expect otherwise from a position which in an age of insecurity and widespread poverty provided for many security, a relatively high and rising income, paid holidays, sick pay, opportunities for promotion and for an increasing number pensions and subsidised sporting and social facilities?

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to argue that in addition to providing security there were other factors in office work that were valued by office workers. Some, such as performing non-manual work or working in London, were extrinsic. Others, such as the importance of service, character and esprit de corps were values which were specific to clerks and the work environments they operated in. All, however, contributed to forming a value system which sustained and directed the actions of clerks. London Clerks regarded themselves as men who possessed character, who

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<sup>83</sup> See RBSG Archives GB 1502/GM/339/1, 'Glyn's Clerk's Register, 1864-1918'

provided services, who associated themselves with the companies they worked in and colleagues they worked with. They saw themselves as being different from many other men in that they did not perform manual work and worked in the great metropolis. The value of their labour became enhanced not only by their attitudes to their work but also by the place that they performed it in.

These values became very much the corpus of their occupational masculinity.<sup>84</sup> It was the value that clerks attached to their work that established the professional worth of a man. Promotion, in particular, as a way of measuring many of these values, was seen as the hallmark of a clerk's occupational masculinity. It acted as an important signifier in the matrix of a clerk's discursive framework. It revealed distinctions between himself and different clerical workers. The extent of a clerk's commitment to these ideals and his belief in promotion as a sign of distinction has been seen in the reaction of the L.C.C.'s officials to the Council's imposition of the £200 barrier. Their outrage, as much ideological as it was practical, can be seen as a clear indication of their attachment to the values outlined in this chapter.

Finally, this chapter has argued that the grounds for which many commentators have located strong dissatisfaction amongst clerical workers with their work can be strongly contested. Many of the sources used have been too readily and uncritically accepted. Evidence based on sensationalist newspaper articles, disgruntled clerks or clerical journals needs to be placed in its historical context.<sup>85</sup> Oral evidence from clerks, and from their diaries and memoirs presents a very different picture. Many

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<sup>84</sup> For a discussion of middle-class occupational masculinity see Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, Family Fortunes, (London: Century Hutchinson Ltd., 1987)

<sup>85</sup> For the growth of a sensationalist form of journalism and press in this period see Jean Chalaby, The Invention of Journalism, (London: Macmillan, 1998)

clerks appear to have been satisfied with the work they carried out, and/or offered no serious grounds for complaint. Such attitudes can be seen to be a result of the financial rewards which this work offered, in addition to the psychic ones which were often sustained by the value system outlined above. There are serious grounds to question the entire historiography which has attempted to depict clerks in this period.

## Chapter V

### **The Mechanisation and Feminisation of the Office, 1870-1914 – Threats or Opportunities?**

Between 1870 and 1914 many offices were transformed by the increased use of female clerks and technology. While the 1871 Census for England and Wales, for example, listed only 1,446 female clerks, there were 124,843 in 1911.<sup>1</sup> In relation to technology, a whole array of equipment from typewriters to addressographs, adding machines to filing cabinets, began to be increasingly available and used by clerks. The increased use of women and technology, along with the application of rational procedures to office work, revolutionised the working environment of many clerical workers. It created what was in effect the modern office. Whether these were auspicious developments or the converse, however, has been a widely contested subject. It is this question that this chapter aims to answer.

The majority of commentators have tended to view these changes as an ominous development for male clerks. Paul Attewell in his article, 'The Clerk Deskilled: A Study in False Nostalgia', has listed a whole host of writers from 1912 to 1987, writing on the United States, Germany and Britain who see such changes as precipitating the decline and fall of the male clerk.<sup>2</sup> The most widely quoted of these, Harry Braverman, saw these developments as changing the clerk from the

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<sup>1</sup> Jane E. Lewis, 'Women Clerical Workers in the Late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries', in Gregory Anderson, The White-Blouse Revolution – Female Office Workers Since 1870, (Manchester: Manchester University, 1988), p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Attewell, 'The Clerk Deskilled: A Study in False Nostalgia', Journal of Historical Sociology Vol.2 No. 4, December 1989, p. 357.

autonomous, skilled worker of the mid-nineteenth century to the automated, assembly line office proletariat of the twentieth.<sup>3</sup> Summarising the general arguments of these writers, Attewell has written,

The story begins in the nineteenth century, with the clerk as craftsman or artisan – a skilled generalist, knowledgeable, well-rounded, waiting his turn to step up into a partnership. This is followed by the onslaught of Taylorism, feminization, and office machinery, three forces which reduce the clerk to a narrow machine minder in a clerical factory. The historical coup de grace is left for the present period, when computer automisation removes the last vestiges of skill from a once-cherished occupation.<sup>4</sup>

Gregory Anderson, who faithfully follows this argument, presents women as one of the major culprits in his chapter, 'The Clerk Under Pressure' in his work on Victorian clerks.<sup>5</sup>

The introduction of women into the office was treated in a similar manner by feminist historians in the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> Their tendency was to link the rapid increase in the numbers of female clerks in the latter half of the nineteenth century with the spread of technology in the office in the same period. As women are argued to have handled much of this new equipment, feminisation and mechanisation are seen to have been inextricably linked. This group also tended to display a zero-sum game approach to

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<sup>3</sup> Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capitalism, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974)

<sup>4</sup> Attewell, 'The Clerk Deskilled', p. 357.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory Anderson, Victorian Clerk, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), pp. 52-73.

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent summary of writings by feminist historians on the subject see the first part of Ellen Jordan's article, 'The Lady Clerks at the Prudential: The Beginnings of Vertical Segregation by Sex in Clerical Work in Nineteenth-Century Britain', Gender and History, Vol. 8 No. 1 April 1996, pp. 65-81.



the entire subject; the more women clerks and technology in the office, the greater the pain of the male clerk. Jane E. Lewis, for example, has argued, '...To all intents and purposes, clerical work became increasingly feminised and deskilled during the twentieth century. Furthermore, as this happened the wages of male clerks suffered considerable decline, while those of female clerks, whose wages were less than half those of men before the First World War, showed a marginal increase.'<sup>7</sup> In more direct terms, Meta Zimmeck has commented, '...If clerical work was passing out of the men's sphere, it was passing into the women's. If men were losing, women were gaining. If there were fewer jobs for the boys, there were more for the girls.'<sup>8</sup>

These arguments have been the main orthodoxies on the subject for most of the twentieth century. However, more recently two writers have argued against the malign influences of these two factors on the male clerical worker. Paul Attewell has argued against the deskilling and demise of the male clerk. The skilled clerk of the mid-nineteenth century was a myth, clerical work was always subjected to some degree of division of labour, and technology obviated the need for performing mechanical, unskilled work.<sup>9</sup> Samuel Cohn, meanwhile, has argued that rather than undermining male clerks, the introduction of female clerks reinforced their position by introducing a cheap source of labour. The result was an upgrading of male clerical work and better promotional and salary opportunities. Cohn sees technology as having little damaging effects on clerks. While some items of technology such as adding machines may have deskilled clerks, others such as typewriters added to their

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<sup>7</sup> Lewis, 'Women Clerical Workers', p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> Meta Zimmeck, 'Jobs for the Girls: the Expansion of Clerical Work for Women, 1850-1914', in Angel V. John (ed.), *Unequal Opportunities – Women's Employment in England 1800-1918*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1986), p. 156.

<sup>9</sup> Attewell, 'The Clerk Deskilled'

repertoire of skills. The effect of technology was thus largely neutral.<sup>10</sup> Cohn's argument about the beneficial effects for male clerks of introducing women into the workforce has been echoed by Ellen Jordan's work on female clerks at The Prudential.<sup>11</sup>

This chapter will first deal with the question of technology. It will examine the application of new mechanical devices in the office, paying particular attention to the re-organisation of bureaucratic procedures in this period which formed an integral part of the introduction of this new technology. Following this it will discuss the impact of office mechanisation. Finally, attitudes of clerks towards this technology will be examined. It will follow the arguments presented by Attewell and Cohn, and argue that the increasing mechanisation of the office had no damaging impact on the majority of male clerical workers. Clerks acquired important new skills in the latter half of the nineteenth century via the introduction of such technology. Machinery also upgraded clerical work by getting rid of many repetitive and mechanical jobs. In addition, it will argue that the whole emphasis of the debate has been in many respects misdirected. What was taking place in the office in the decades running up to the First World War was a process not of deskilling, but rather of re-skilling. Much of the technology simply changed the way clerks performed their office work. Old skills had to be jettisoned and new skills learnt. Too much emphasis has been put on technology *per se*. The stench of technological determinism, the belief that technology transforms everything in its path, hangs too heavily over the whole discussion. Technology in the office was simply a tool. It facilitated the work that had to be done. To argue that technology deskilled office work is thus to make a claim from a false premise as it

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<sup>10</sup> Samuel Cohn, The Process of Occupational Sex-Typing: The Feminisation of Clerical Labor in Great Britain, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985)

<sup>11</sup> Jordan, 'The Lady Clerks at the Prudential'

ignores what was actually happening to the work itself. Finally, in relation to clerks' attitudes to this technology, it will be argued that while there is a literature of complaint, there is also one of support and applause for these innovations. In no sense can this technology be said to have been imposed in blind opposition to all clerks.

In relation to the dramatic increase in the use of female clerks, this chapter will question the assumptions that have dominated the debate. These can be seen as follows; the introduction of female clerks was antithetical to the economic and professional interests of male clerks, female clerks were replacing male clerks, the introduction of women into the office was tied up with the inauguration of new technologies, and thus symptomatic of the deskilling of the male clerk, and finally, the growing use of women in the office offended the male clerk's moral outlook by breaking the taboo against women working outside of the home and thus broke gender boundaries. These assumptions are unfounded. The introduction of female clerks did not upset the economic position of male clerks. Their salaries rose and, as has been argued earlier, their promotional opportunities carried on apace. Echoing Cohn, it will argue that it was the very introduction of women clerks as a secondary labour force which reinforced the relatively buoyant position of male clerks in London between 1890 and 1914. In relation to gender stereotypes, it will question the view that the entry of women offended male clerks. While it is true that the employment of married females would have been unacceptable to late Victorian and Edwardian male clerks, there is no real evidence that this also applied to single females. Since the existence of marriage bars, a clause which obliged female clerks to resign their positions on marrying, existed in many offices, the threat of the employment of married women happening was effectively precluded. This in fact is borne out by census statistics

which show an overwhelmingly single, young, female work force. In 1911, for example, of the 32,893 female commercial clerks living in London, 31,939 were single.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the vast majority of female clerks concurred in this gendering of the workplace. Gender stereotypes were shared, not opposed, by both men and women in the office. As a result of this, it is difficult to see how male clerks could have been offended by the increasing use of members of the opposite sex in the office. This can be seen in the fact that so many female clerks came from clerical households.

### **Technology and New Office Procedures – The Evolution of the Modern Office**

In February, 1910, an article appeared in The Clerk, entitled, ‘The Machine Monster and the Clerk’, by Murray Fernie. The author, a clerk and member of the N.U.C., had recently visited an exhibition by The Organiser magazine, and in the article described the various examples of new office technology which he had seen on show. The article illustrated the advances that had been made in office technology in the years before the First World War. As Fernie wrote, ‘The most prominent example to-day of the introduction of the machine into the clerical sphere is of course, the typewriter, but a walk through this exhibition soon convinced one that the typewriter was only a step to a very much larger application of mechanical devices to all branches of clerical work’. Calculating machines, billing machines, addressographs, and copiers were among the many pieces of machinery that were on show.<sup>13</sup>

There were two principal reasons for the increased application of office mechanisation from the 1880s onwards. The first was the increased scale of

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<sup>12</sup> Census of England and Wales, 1911, (London: His Majesty Stationery Office, 1911).

<sup>13</sup> The Clerk, February, 1910, p. 20.

bureaucracies and operations. As markets grew and offices became larger more data had to be processed. In insurance houses there were more policies to process, at banks more cheques to clear, in commercial offices more customers to serve. More traditional, labour intensive processes found it increasingly difficult to keep up. An advert for the Burrough's Adding Machine, for example, promised, '...A speed of from 1,500 to 1,800 items per hour may be obtained by an ordinary operator with a few hours practice, but an expert readily lists from 2,500 to 3,000 items per hour, and some as high as 3,500.'<sup>14</sup> For a large scale bureaucracy such as the Post Office where, for instance, postal orders (first introduced in 1881) increased in value from £3,451,284 in 1882-3 to £57,206,000 in 1913-14 and in numbers from 7,980,328 to 159,242,000 respectively,<sup>15</sup> technology which guaranteed speed and accuracy was a clear solution to a rapidly growing volume of work.<sup>16</sup>

The second reason was that such machinery was quintessentially seen as a labour saving device. As some organisations grew in scale and turnover there was a need to increase staff. The number of employees, for example, at the Post Office increased from 46,956 in 1880 to 212,310 in 1910 and 249,696 in 1913/14 after the nationalisation of the private telephone companies.<sup>17</sup> The railways, banks, insurance companies, national and local government, and other large scale commercial and industrial organisations, particularly following the mergers of the 1890s, experienced similar proportional growth. Such expansion (alongside an increase in competition) led to an emphasis on the need to minimise as far as possible such increases in staff

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<sup>14</sup> General Post Office Archives POST 30/1017A, 'Burroughs Adding Machine Use in Post Office (Papers 1900-1913)'.

<sup>15</sup> M.J. Daunton, *Royal Mail The Post Office Since 1840*, (London: The Athlone Press, 1985), p. 92.

<sup>16</sup> See General Post Office Archives POST 30/ 4301-02, 'Labour Saving Appliances: use in relation to clerical work in Post Office, Parts 1 & 2'. See also above archive on Burroughs Adding Machine.

<sup>17</sup> M.J. Daunton, *Royal Mail*, p. 194.

numbers. Office mechanisation and rationalisation were a means of doing this. At the Post Office the term 'Labour Saving Appliances' was used to refer to office machinery. Justification for the acquisition of such items to the Treasury was done on the basis of savings in clerical costs. A return to the Treasury from the Money Order Department for 1907, for example, showed an estimated saving 'on clerical labour in connection with Banking Orders' of £78 a year by the use of five Burroughs Adding Machines.<sup>18</sup>

The introduction of technology into the office went hand in hand with a more rational re-organisation of office procedures. A good example of this was information storage, retrieval and dissemination. Up until around 1870 the way offices processed information appears to have been extremely haphazard. Business transactions were often recorded in bound ledgers, with loose leaf documents tied together in bundles.<sup>19</sup> Space was allotted to certain areas, and if this proved insufficient new pages had to be found elsewhere in the ledger, or the additional information was recorded in new bound volumes. Information thus tended to be recorded in an unrelated manner in bulky ledgers. Elsewhere they were tied together in bundles of paper. The result was the frequent loss of important documentation, and of office time in the search for relevant documents.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, until the latter half of the nineteenth century offices lacked systems whereby information could be easily located and retrieved. Jill Pellew, for example, notes that at the Home Office certain clerks, who had worked in the office for years,

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<sup>18</sup> General Post Office Archives POST 30/1017A, 'Burroughs Adding Machine Use in Post Office (Papers 1900-1913) File XI'.

<sup>19</sup> See Samuel Cohn, *The Process of Occupational Sex-Typing*, p. 87.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

had built up a store of information of where certain documents, such as legal precedents were, and how these documents related to other relevant material.<sup>21</sup> Some even stored information which had not been properly recorded. They were, in effect, human data banks whose jealous guarding of such information made their positions in the office indispensable.

Such a system had immense draw-backs. Only so much information could be provided by one individual at any one moment, the system depended on that individual being constantly in the office. On his death or retirement major disruptions were created in the daily office routine, and of course there was the human element to be taken into account. Information could be as much withheld as given.

The introduction of filing systems from the 1870s transformed the way information was processed in offices along more rational and efficient lines. Loose leaf files, folders and cabinets began to replace and supplement the older, bulkier bound ledgers and bundles of paper. Information was arranged according to topic, subject or company rather than, in many cases, the date of arrival. The Stolzenberg System, for example, was a cabinet comprised of a number of compartments which housed files according to alphabetical letter or subject. Card indexing systems also meant that information could be easily located, retrieved and even summarised.<sup>22</sup> Such systems were capable of holding far greater volumes of information and distributing it far more efficiently than any individual, however experienced.

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<sup>21</sup> Jill Pellew, The Home Office 1848-1914 – from Clerks to Bureaucrats, (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1982), pp. 7-9.

<sup>22</sup> See Lawrence R. Dicksee, Office Organisation and Management, (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons Ltd., 1910), Chapter V.

While the mechanisation of the office and its rationalisation may have begun in the large bureaucracies such as the Post Office and the Home Office there is evidence that by the turn of the century this had filtered down to medium and even small scale offices in London. Applications to the London County Council from 1905 to 1914, for instance, for female typists, reveal a large number of applicants who had experience as shorthand typists and operating copying machines in small and medium offices.<sup>23</sup> Despite this, the spread of mechanisation and rationalisation was almost certainly uneven and it is highly likely that 1914 London would have evidenced a wide diversity of offices, some little altered since Dickens' writings, others boasting the most up-to-date technologies and procedures. Nevertheless, it is clear that for a large number the impact of these new technologies and procedures on the office were immense. As Cohn has argued, the modernisation of the office lay not only in the introduction of the type-writer and the adding machine, but in the creation of virtually every piece of office equipment, from paper clips, carbon paper and filing cabinets to loose-leaf note books, many of which entailed the initiation of new office procedures which transformed the office.<sup>24</sup> How did these changes impact on clerks and what were their reactions to them?

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<sup>23</sup> London Metropolitan Archives CL/ESTAB/4/59-62, 'Applications for Class II Typists, 1898-1915'.

<sup>24</sup> Cohn, pp. 83-4.



## **Machine Monster or Deliverer? – The Impact of Technology in the Office.**

Murray Fernie's view of the new technology he described was overwhelmingly negative. Such innovations represented a direct threat to the job security and financial interests of the clerical worker. The National Union of Clerks' aim to establish a minimum wage would, he predicted, be confounded by the introduction of such technology. In his article he forecasted that, '...while the N.U.C. will be engaged in the much needed increasing in the cost of clerical labour to the employer, the cost of mechanical clerical appliances, at present pretty high, will inevitably be rapidly coming down until their cheapness will lead to their installation, largely to take the place of N.U.C. minimum wage labour.'<sup>25</sup> Technology would thus obviate the need for much clerical labour. In addition, Fernie linked it to a de-humanisation of clerical work and the introduction of women and youths into the office.

In the following edition of the magazine, a rejoinder to Fernie was written by R.G. Acock.<sup>26</sup> Acock took a diametrically opposite view to the whole question of machinery and office work. For him technology was beneficial. While it made some clerical work redundant, overall, it actually increased clerical employment by facilitating and creating more business, and thus opening up new fields for clerical labour. In addition, machinery elevated office work by making clerical labour more specialised which Acock saw as the distinguishing feature of modern office work. 'Present-day office methods tend more and more', he argued, 'towards retaining the clerk who uses his brains, whether it be in typing a letter or keeping books'.<sup>27</sup> For

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<sup>25</sup> The Clerk, February, 1910, p. 20.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., March, 1910, p.38.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Acock there simply was no option. Offices and clerks had to wholeheartedly accept the new technology or else face bankruptcy and unemployment.

Who was right? Did technology produce unemployment, a decrease in salaries, deskilling and an inhuman working environment, or rather the opposite, an overall elevation of clerical work? From the evidence it would appear that Acock's analysis rather than Fernie's lay somewhat closer to what was actually taking place. The rapid increase in clerical workers of both sexes coincided with the introduction and increased application of these new technologies. Overall, salaries increased rather than decreased. The dystopian nightmare of the dehumanised office machine operator failed to appear. The 1951 UK census, for example, showed that only 3 per cent of clerks were specialised machine operators.<sup>28</sup>

In relation to the question of deskilling, there is convincing evidence that this simply did not take place.<sup>29</sup> Typewriting, short-hand, telegraphy, filing, indexing, even using the telephone, were all new skills which had to be learnt. Felix Owen, for example, who worked for a year in the City as a Junior Insurance Broker at the Royal Exchange in 1918 before going away to sea, listed the skills that one needed before entering the office, '...When I left school, and I was thinking about going for a job, I mean, I used to look at advertisements for jobs, and one of the conditions put down was good at figures, handwriting, able to use the telephone. I mean that was one of the things you had to do before you could get a job.'<sup>30</sup> Florence Johnson studied at a typewriting bureau from 1908 for around two years before she obtained a clerical position at the

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<sup>28</sup> Attewell, 'The Clerk Deskilled', p. 377.

<sup>29</sup> See Cohn, The Process of Occupational Sex-Typing, Chapter 3, and Attewell, 'The Clerk Deskilled'

<sup>30</sup> The British Library, Millennium Memory Bank Archive, C900/04111, 'Felix Owen'.

Metropolitan Board of Water.<sup>31</sup> Similarly short-hand and telegraphy were both skills which had to be studied and practiced for several years before they could be fully mastered.

Moreover, much of this new technology was performing work which had been described as 'mechanical' even before machines had been designed to carry out these repetitive and essentially monotonous tasks. A memorandum sent by the Controller of the Stationery Office around the Civil Service Departments in 1917, for example, informing them of the technology currently being used in the Service, argued that the introduction of machines would result in a, '...reduction of monotonous labour which tends to deaden latent creative and critical faculties.'<sup>32</sup>

The addressograph was an excellent example of this. As the name suggests, the machine was designed, via a stencil and cartridge system, automatically to address envelopes. The machine was especially useful in banks as it could be adapted to print out cheques. Every six or even three months when the registrar office would send out dividend payments on behalf of companies to often thousands of shareholders the machine was a great labour saving device. Lists of shareholders, dividend warrants, and addressed envelopes could be printed out at a fraction of the cost and time it would take to perform the task manually.<sup>33</sup> Before the introduction of the machine this monotonous but essential job had to be carried out by hand. It can thus be seen that the addressograph was effectively mechanising a mechanical job which had earlier taken up the time and labour of clerical workers.

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<sup>31</sup> The British Library, Paul Thompson and Thea Vigne Interviews, QD1/FLWE/300, 'Florence Johnson'.

<sup>32</sup> General Post Office Archives POST 30/4301, 'Labour Saving Appliances'.

<sup>33</sup> See J.F. Davis, Bank Organisation, Management and Accounts, (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1910), p. 40.

An example of the benefits of mechanisation to the clerical worker can be seen in the introduction of adding machines to write up the Dividend Pass Books in the Town Office of Glyn's Bank in 1903. The experiment was said to have been a success and to have, '...relieved the Pass Book writers of a great deal of their Evening Work'.<sup>34</sup> The following year the use of the machines was applied to the Clearing Books and Ledgers. The system was popular with customers as the figures were plainly written and could be easily read. As a result of this experiment, the work load on the clerks at Glyn's using the machines was decreased at a time when the expansion of work in other departments meant that the number of clerks, despite increases in recruitment, was failing to keep up with the added work load. The introduction of this new technology was thus beneficial. No clerks were sacked as a consequence of its introduction.

### **Re-skilling**

What has been missed in the whole discussion of the impact of technology on the late Victorian and Edwardian office is that much of the new machinery and procedures simply changed the way in which office labour was carried out. Old procedures and skills were replaced by more modern methods which required new skills. Listing all the new technologies and giving them marks out of ten for their putative degree of complexity, a system, for example, used by Cohn in his examination of the subject, fails to appreciate this.<sup>35</sup> In many cases what was happening in the office between 1880 and 1914 was not deskilling but rather a process of re-skilling whereby clerks

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<sup>34</sup> RBSG Archives GB 1502/GM/710/1, 'Glyn's Town Office Annual Reports, 1896-1911'.

<sup>35</sup> Cohn, pp. 81-90.

were learning new skills as a result of new technologies which were replacing older ones.

A good example of this can be seen in the use of adding machines. This technology is used by Cohn as evidence of deskilling.<sup>36</sup> Formerly clerks were able to add-up mentally long columns of figures. This was a traditional clerical skill known as casting, and was seen by Cohn as being made redundant by this machinery. Clerks now simply had to enter the various figures, which would be printed on a slip of paper, pull a lever, and the sum total would appear.

An illustration of adding machines in use in this period, which casts doubts on this evaluation, was provided by W. Howarth in his chapter on The London Clearing House in his work on the banking and clearing systems of Britain.<sup>37</sup> Howarth estimated that about two hundred and forty-five million pounds worth of cheques were cleared by the House each week in 1900. Arithmetic, particularly addition, was a fundamental skill of the clearing house clerks whose jobs it was to calculate, by adding up cheques, how much money the banks owed each other as a result of cashing each others cheques. It is no surprise, therefore, that adding machines were introduced relatively early into this financial institution. At the time of writing Howarth reported that the Clearing House had 170 of these machines.<sup>38</sup>

Discussing the use of adding machines at the London Clearing House, Howarth wrote,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 84.

<sup>37</sup> W. Howarth, Our Banking System and Clearing Houses, (London: Effingham Wilson, 1907).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 63.

...Whereas in the old days one would see the clerks entering the drafts they had received in books at lightening-like speed, and then casting up the totals afterwards – now all is changed. On the five floors one sees men sitting each with a little machine in front of him. This is that marvel of mechanical ingenuity – a calculating machine...It is indeed a busy scene when the clearings are on. On each floor there is the never ceasing click, click, of the machines, the nimble fingers of the clearers, with one hand turning over the cheques, with the other playing with the keyboard, listing and totalling at a great rate – some much more expert than others, since in this, as in typing, practice is everything.<sup>39</sup>

Mental arithmetic was not strictly required in order to use these machines. However, one sees in the above account the use of new skills such as agility and speed in entering figures, and the ability to turn cheques, register their amounts and enter at the same time. As Howarth said, this was something which needed practice. Proficiency in using these machines was learnt over a period of time. Rapidity and accuracy, however, were still what was overwhelmingly demanded of clearing house clerks. The introduction of adding machines simply meant that new skills had to be learnt to achieve this.

In addition, it is ridiculous to argue that this technology meant that clerks simply jettisoned their arithmetical skills. Adding machines were not used to perform all calculations. Trial mental calculations were performed to check that correct amounts

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. pp. 62-3.

had been entered. The persistence of mental arithmetic can be seen in the following lines by Howarth,

...The rapidity with which the mental calculations are made is simply marvellous; the clearers run up column after column of figures with their eye, dotting down totals as they go on, and, with the majority, it is the strange exception to find an error. Of course, when the calculating machine is used an enormous amount of brain work is saved, and as a matter of fact, it is practically impossible for the instrument to make a mistake in a total except, by chance, the 'clearer' types the wrong amount of a draft.<sup>40</sup>

The overall impression would appear to be that the clerks of the London Clearing House did not forget their arithmetical skills, these simply became downgraded as they re-skilled using the new technology available.

The example of adding machines reveals a certain trend. Its inauguration meant that clerks had to learn new skills to operate the machine effectively. Practice over a period of time was vital to gain proficiency. In addition, older skills such as mental arithmetic were not abandoned but simply downgraded. Re-skilling rather than deskilling appears to have followed the introduction of the adding machine, and by connection other complex office machinery. Such technology can therefore not be seen as having a harmful effect on clerical workers. Nor is there evidence that older clerks were unwilling to learn how to use these technologies.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 69.

## Technology as Tool and Facilitator

In his letter in support of technology, R.G. Acock located the advantages of technology in the overall changes that had taken place in the clerical profession,

Office work at the present day is more of a fine art than it used to be. A clerk must be something more than a writer. His work involves more special training, according to the special branch he intends to take up. The clerk is essentially a brain-worker. It requires something more than a mechanical operation to use a calculating machine, or any of the more up-to-date 'office machines.' Present-day office methods tend more and more to retaining the clerk who uses his brains, whether it be in typing a letter or keeping books. The clerk finds that knowledge in regard to everything relating to the business world and office appliances is the best asset he can possess. Under present conditions, and still more so in the near future, will the lie be to the legend: 'Any fool can be a clerk.'<sup>41</sup>

Acock was essentially making two points here. The first, seen in the first chapter, was that specialisation was the defining feature of the modern clerk. The second was that this specialisation involved the clerk making more use of his mental abilities. Technology was seen as simply facilitating this process. It was a tool, a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. This latter point was stressed by Lawrence R. Dicksee when he argued that, '...the mere mechanical utilisation of manual dexterity produced

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<sup>41</sup> The Clerk, March, 1910, p. 38.



nothing but disastrous results.' It was the mixing of manual skill with a thorough knowledge of the office work which produced a fully accomplished clerk.<sup>42</sup>

The point which both these men made in relation to the impact of technology on office work seems to have been completely missed by commentators. New technologies should not be seen as some autonomous historical phenomenon which impacted on clerical workers towards the ends of the nineteenth century and completely transformed their working lives. They were simply tools which clerks applied to the actual content of their work. At the Home Office, for instance, four calculating machines were used in the statistics branch where clerks carried out work which was described by the Permanent Under-Secretary of the Home Office, Sir Edmund Troup, in 1912 as requiring carefulness and a good deal of intelligence.<sup>43</sup> These machines were used to facilitate highly complex and innovative clerical work. They were upgrading rather than downgrading office labour.

The whole question of whether de-skilling was taking place should therefore take far more into consideration the actual work that clerks were doing, and what prior knowledge was needed to perform it. As Dicksee argued, clerical work had as much to do with what a clerk knew about the subject or task he or she was dealing with, as with the skills which were applied to it in order for this work to be realised. This point was precisely made by Miss E.A. Charlesworth, Chief Superintendent of typists at the Local Government Board and representative of the Civil Servants Typist's Association. Asked at the MacDonnell Commission, 1912-13, established to investigate the staffing and work of the Civil Service, about the time it would take an

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<sup>42</sup> Lawrence R. Dicksee, *Office Organisation and Management*, p. 43.

<sup>43</sup> *Fifty-Sixth Report of the Civil Service Commission, 1912-13 Cd 6332, Vol. XV, 16<sup>th</sup> May, 1912, p. 116.*

average girl to learn to type at a rate of 70 to 90 words a minute, Charlesworth answered,

It would take her a year, I think. But I think experienced people in this work do not attach much value to the number of words a minute that you can copy. It is an easy thing to master the manipulation of the machine; a child can do it just the same as anyone, almost, can learn to sew; but to produce a garment is quite another matter. I think, in typewriting it is the same thing. A child can very soon learn to move her fingers quickly over the keys; but what her production would be like is a very different thing.<sup>44</sup>

It is in this respect that serious questions can be raised against the whole argument that clerks were being deskilled by technology before the First World War. As has been argued in the first chapter, as society and the economy became more elaborate, clerical work became more complex. One major aspect of this, as Geddes, Acock, and other contemporaries argued, was that the clerk became more specialised. How, therefore, could clerks have become deskilled in this period?

### **The Clerical Perception of Office Technology**

What was the male clerical perception of the mechanisation of the office? While the introduction of the typewriter or adding machine into the office may have been no inauspicious development for the clerk, there may still have been hostile reactions and

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 1912, p. 67.

feeling of dread towards these changes. Was, for example, Murray Fernie's reaction typical of a large number of male clerical workers?

Clearly there was some opposition to mechanisation. Some sectors of the clerking profession such as male copy clerks, many of whom were temporary workers and on the margins of the profession, were adversely affected and therefore could have been expected to oppose its introduction. Others, such as Fernie, may have been opposed for ideological reasons. Within the clerical trade union movement, for example, there were certainly elements who saw in technology attempts by management to extend their control over the workplace and their employees. Many more, particularly from an older generation, may have felt apprehension at the introduction of what would at the time have appeared to be revolutionary technology and the change to the work routine which accompanied it. The question, however, is how representative was this group of clerks in general?

The evidence would suggest that while such opposition did exist, it was limited. In clerical journals, for example, there was very little real hostility to mechanisation. Only in The Clerk does one find some opposition, and even here this was tempered by letters such as Acock's which supported technology, and intermittently, articles on the advantages of technical education. Similarly in the diaries and interviews there is no trace of any such hostility. Indeed, George Rose, for example, was enamoured with the whole concept of the telephone and the opportunities which this offered him to organise his social life from the offices of the Commercial Gas Company in Stepney, East London.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Essex Records Office, The Diaries of George Rose, D/DU418/1-15

Support, in fact, can often be detected. Technology was welcomed by some as a sign of progress and modernity. Acock's sentiments can be found elsewhere. The Office magazine and other similar journals almost worshipped the very idea of technology. The opening edition of the magazine on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1888 wrote,

Typewriting and shorthand writing are sister arts and time-savers; the copying press and other mechanical contrivances for multiplying copies of documents are of no less importance. None of these arts and contrivances have, until now, been brought to public notice, and advocated and encouraged through the channel of a bitter press.<sup>46</sup>

Cohn noted the existence of an extensive number of journals around the beginning of the twentieth century which catered for shorthand, a skill which was closely connected with new technologies such as the typewriter and copying-machines.<sup>47</sup> Clerical journals, in general, tended to convey a positive attitude to the mechanisation of the office. A cartoon, for example, from The County Magazine entitled, '**The Abacists** – How a branch which does possess a calculating machine supplies the deficiency', shows three dumbstruck clerks in a shambolic office, trying with evident difficulty to use an abacus to balance their books. (See figure1.) Elsewhere, the magazine reported in 1909 that, '...The contest arranged by the Burrough's Adding Machine Co. for speed on the 'artificial brain machines', was a great success, both for its uniqueness and the conviviality of the evening.'<sup>48</sup> Although the bank's representative only came fourth, it was with evident pride that the journal announced

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<sup>46</sup> The Office, September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1888, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> Cohn, p. 85.

<sup>48</sup> The County Magazine, No. 6, 1909, p. 275.

# THE ABACISTS.

How a Branch which does not possess a calculating machine supplies the deficiency.



This mysterious word appeared in the Branch News in the previous number, and our artist having looked it up in "Chamber's Encyclopedia," found the following definition—Abacist, one who counts upon an abacus (a beadrack).

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that the American record of 4 min. 16 secs was beaten by at least 50% of the competitors.<sup>49</sup> Such speed competitions in using adding-machines, as well as short-hand and type-writers, seem to have been a relatively common phenomenon in the office world.<sup>50</sup> Prize-money was offered for fastest times, and many were organised by commercial companies eager to market their new products. The continued existence of these events and the positive reporting they received in the clerical journals suggests that they were popular, and by extension the technology which they tried to promote. Overall one can argue that it was this opinion, rather than the converse, that was more representative of clerks' attitudes to the mechanisation of the office.

## **Women**

### **Women as Secondary Labour and Synthetic Turnover**

Murray Fernie's disquiet towards technology also extended to women. Non-unionised clerks reflecting on the impact of the increased mechanisation of the office would, in his opinion, become, '...troubled with an uneasy feeling regarding female competition, which in some vague and undetermined manner he thinks should be stopped.'<sup>51</sup> Hostility towards the increased feminisation of clerical work was certainly evident in The Clerk, despite its advocacy of equal pay and rights for female clerks, and the existence of a woman's page in the magazine. In the first edition of the magazine, an article entitled, 'Tuppenny Girl Clerks' argued, 'Over and over again

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Reports and announcements of such competitions regularly appeared in The Office. See November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1888, for example.

<sup>51</sup> The Clerk, February, 1910, p. 20.

women are substituted for men because of cheapness, but sooner or later women will realise that in accepting this inferior position they are dragging down their fellows.'<sup>52</sup>

Throughout the period, despite the protests of female contributors such as May E. Taplin, articles and letters continued to appear complaining and warning about the increased use of women in the office.

Were female clerks so damaging to male clerks during this period? Did, for example, their willingness to accept lower incomes result in the decline in salaries and general working conditions for male clerks? As has been argued, many writers on the subject have been prepared to accept this scenario. Research by Cohn, and more recently by Ellen Jordan, has, however, seriously thrown this whole picture into disarray. Cohn looking at the Post Office and the Great Western Railway, and Jordan at the Prudential, have argued that primary and secondary labour markets using female labour were firmly established in these organisations between 1870 and 1914. All these organisations, common to most offices, had incremental pay structures. While these pay structures were economically beneficial in the primary labour markets, increased pay over time reflecting the growing expertise of the staff which in turn helped to retain such workers, they made no sense in relation to the secondary markets. These sectors had relatively low learning curves. Workers here would be far more likely to be still holding entry-level jobs long after having joined the organisation.<sup>53</sup> In this context, paying sustained yearly increases to staff made no economic sense and was, in contrast to the primary clerical workers, a costly source of expenditure.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., January, 1908, p. 9.

<sup>53</sup> See Cohn, p. 105.

The solution to this problem was to find a source of labour who would voluntarily leave after a period of time, usually of around six to seven years. This was long enough for them to master their area of responsibility but not prove too costly to employ. Boys and youths had commonly fulfilled this role. Some were dismissed, some left of their own accord, and others were retained when they matured into adulthood. The sheer increase in the size of the clerical market, the increasing public opposition to boy labour at the turn of the century and the fact that they could only be retained for relatively short periods of time made them, however, increasingly unpopular with employers.<sup>54</sup> It was in this context that young, single women became increasingly used as a source of secondary labour. What made this possible was the imposition of the marriage bar. When they married female clerks were forced to give up their positions. A system which Cohn terms 'synthetic turnover' was thereby instituted which ensured that the vast majority of women would work for an organisation for around seven years, a period which was far more appropriate to the needs of the employers.<sup>55</sup> Those female clerks who did not get married were able to take up senior managerial positions supervising clerical workers of their own sex. Furthermore, female clerks, predominantly from the middle classes, could be selected from a social milieu which was felt to be more appropriate to the office environment.<sup>56</sup> The whole system thus appeared, as least for the companies and offices concerned, to be a virtuous circle.

Cohn and Jordan's conclusions have largely been borne out in the archives examined in this study. At the London County Council, for example, women were first introduced in 1898. On 14<sup>th</sup> July, 1898, the Clerk of the Council, C.F. Steward, wrote

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., Chapter 8.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. Chapter 4.

<sup>56</sup> See Lewis, 'Women Clerical Workers', p. 37.



a report to the Establishment Committee recommending the employment of females clerks,

...On entering the Service the [male] Junior Clerks receive a commencing salary of £80 a year and naturally look forward to rise in course of time to the higher classes and to perform the more important work devolving upon officials in those classes. The necessary copying or typewriting work has, however, to be done and, as above pointed out, forms a portion of duties of clerks who have been for some years in the service and who are in receipt of salaries of £100 a year or more. A copying department composed of Lady Clerks would gradually relieve some, at any rate, of the departments of the ordinary copying and typewriting, and would result in a considerable saving in as much as the pay of Lady copyists would, if the scale in government offices is adopted be from 16/- to 25/- a week, with a somewhat higher salary for a superintendent.<sup>57</sup>

Within less than a year of lady clerks being taken on a report appeared before the Establishment Committee asking it to recommend to the Council that women should resign upon marriage. It was pointed out that this was standard procedure in Government offices. It also requested that a gratuity be given to lady clerks on resignation who had served no less than six years.<sup>58</sup> As Cohn has observed, such gratuities were given in order to ensure that female staff were kept on for the optimal time.<sup>59</sup> Both recommendations were carried.

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<sup>57</sup> London Metropolitan Archives LCC/MIN/4644, 'L.C.C. Establishment Committee Papers, 1898'.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. Report of the Clerk, April 27<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>59</sup> Cohn, p. 102.

While the L.C.C. was busily hiring female clerks it was attempting to scale down its use of Boy Clerks, a grade of clerical workers aged 14 to 20. A report from C.F. Stewart on 14<sup>th</sup> July, 1898, recommending the use of lady clerks, clearly shows that the two were firmly related,

The Council on 28<sup>th</sup> January, 1896, instructed us to consider and report what, if any, office in the clerical establishment of the Council were suitable for women, and what arrangements should be made to enable women to become candidates. On 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 1897, when we reported to the Council on the question of gradually abolishing the class of boy clerks, reference was made to the above instruction, and the opinion was expressed that a considerable amount of copying and typewriting work could with advantage be allotted to a copying department composed of lady clerks.<sup>60</sup>

Boy clerks were gradually reduced at the L.C.C. and absorbed into the new Minor Establishment grade of 1906. The recruitment of female staff into the L.C.C. was seen as a means of removing juvenile clerical labour. It was supported by the argument that by the use of lady clerks, male clerks could be more appropriately applied to work which would better justify their salaries. This did not mean, of course, that all women fully and passively accepted this scenario. Miss E.A. Charlesworth at the Civil Service, for example, was adamant that the work of female typists was far superior to the work of boy clerks, and argued that women were just as capable of doing the same clerical work as men.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, 'L.C.C. Establishment Committee Papers, 1898'

<sup>61</sup> See evidence of Miss E.A. Charlesworth in Fifty-Sixth Report of the Royal Commission, 16<sup>th</sup> May, 1912.

## Income

In relation to the supposed harmful effect of female clerks on male salaries, there is strong evidence, as has been argued in Chapter II, that male clerical incomes rose rather than fell over this period in London. Rises in clerical incomes during a period of rapid feminisation clearly discount the whole argument that such a phenomenon was damaging to the financial well-being of the London male clerk. Conversely, they support the thesis, put forward by Ellen Jordan, and suggested above, that the increased employment of female clerks was in the interest of male clerical workers as the low incomes of women subsidised continuous incremental increases for men.<sup>62</sup>

Another area which should be incorporated into the discussion is household income. Meta Zimmeck, in her essay on female clerks, argued that the justification for paying female clerks less than male clerks was partially justified by the argument that men had, or would have, dependents, and therefore received a 'family' wage. Women, on the other hand, did not, and therefore received a 'single' wage.<sup>63</sup> What Zimmeck fails to note, however, as have all commentators on the subject, is that unless one lived on one's own in this period, which was uncommon, *all* incomes were household incomes. Until individuals got married and set up their own home, all income that was earned by individual household members would be put in a common household 'pot', usually controlled by the wife and mother, who then used it for the common benefit of the household. Individual contributors were allowed to keep some 'pocket money' which would go towards entertainments, holidays, travelling, or lunch money.

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<sup>62</sup> Ellen Jordan, p. 74.

<sup>63</sup> Meta Zimmeck, 'Clerical Work for Women, 1850-1914', p. 163.

Paul Thompson and Thea Vigne's interviews show that this system was ubiquitous amongst clerical and working class families. Even boys doing papers rounds were expected to contribute. As a child for example, Geoffrey Rogers, whose father was a clerk, and who became a clerk himself, had several jobs, delivering newspapers, as a baker's delivery boy, and as an odd job boy at a large house. In all of these he gave his mother his wages and was given back a proportion as pocket money. When he left school and started clerical work he continued to give his salary to his mother.<sup>64</sup> Exactly the same system can be seen in the case of Alfred Henry Pyle who continued to give his salary to his mother until he got married and set up his own home.<sup>65</sup>

The same system applied to female working members of the household. The whole idea of 'pin-money clerks' – single female clerks who had no family responsibilities and spent all of their money on clothes and entertainment - can be dismissed.<sup>66</sup> The vast majority of female clerks lived at home with their families. Earning such small salaries made it impossible for women to live on their own. Meta Zimmeck, for example, notes that some firms made their employment of female clerks who came from outside of London conditional on them having signed statements that they were living with friends or families.<sup>67</sup> It should be remembered that 'pin-money clerks' was a term of abuse of male clerks protesting against the employment of women clerical workers. They were the same group who argued that clerical salaries were decreasing as a result of such practices. The whole nomenclature should be seen for its propaganda purposes rather than for its depiction of reality. In addition, the number of women who set up home on their own, or with other women, was limited. Detailed

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<sup>64</sup> Paul Thompson and Thea Vigne Interviews, QD1/FL WE/161, 'Geoffrey Rogers'.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. QD1/FL WE/63, 'Alfred Henry Pyle'.

<sup>66</sup> For a discussion of pin-money clerks see Gregory Anderson, Victorian Clerks, pp. 57-8.

<sup>67</sup> Meta Zimmeck, p. 163.

census research on Hackney, Dalston, East Dulwich, Acton, Ealing and Chiswick failed to show any female clerical workers living alone, or with other women.<sup>68</sup> What it did show, however, was a multitude of such single females living at home with their families, many of whom were clerical workers themselves. These were families such as Geoffrey Roger's, living in South London, whose father until 1918 was a clerk, who was a clerk himself, and who had three sisters (out of four) who became clerical workers, and at least one brother (out of three) who was a clerk in the military before he emigrated to Canada.<sup>69</sup>

The import of this is that if one looks at incomes as based on the household rather than the individual, as collective rather than atomistic, the employment of young single females as clerical workers was beneficial to families whose heads of household were clerks, or who had clerical household members. Female clerks augmented family incomes, and were thus advantageous to many male clerical workers. Why else would clerical fathers have been so keen to have their children of *both* sexes receive the best education possible? Elsie Barralet, for example, went to the Technical School in Leyton, Florence Johnson received a secondary education until she was sixteen and then went to a typing school for two years before getting a clerical position with the Metropolitan Water Board. Both of Arthur Whitlock's daughters went into clerical positions in 1920 and 1923. This, more than seventy-five years later on, was firmly linked in his mind with the education they received, '...The older daughter because of the school she went to, she got a job at the L.C.C....The other daughter, with her commercial education, got on just as well up in the City.'<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> See National Archives, '1891 Census, Street Index', RG 12/179-207 (for Hackney), RG12/1033-1038 (for Acton) and RG12/468 (for East Dulwich).

<sup>69</sup> Paul Thompson and Thea Vigne Interviews QD1/FLWE/183, 'Geoffrey Rogers'.

<sup>70</sup> British Library, Millennium Memory Bank C900/07507, 'Arthur Whitlock'.

After the First World War, Sylvia Ward's father, who was a Bank Clerk and whose health was already delicate because he had suffered from scarlet fever as a child, had physically worn himself out during the hostilities commuting into the City from Sidcup every day, working, bringing up a family, growing food on an allotment every weekend, serving as a special constable in London, and acting as a physical instructor for the National Volunteers. Sylvia recalls how the doctor told her mother that he should get his two girls working as quickly as possible or else he would have a heart attack.<sup>71</sup> Sylvia duly got a job with her mother's former employer at the Prudential. The opportunity that existed for his two daughters to work in what was seen as a respectable profession for middle class single women was clearly advantageous for Sylvia Ward's clerical father.

It can, therefore, be seen that there are strong grounds for questioning the whole idea that the feminisation of large sectors of clerical work was detrimental to male clerks. Despite the increase in female numbers, male clerical incomes went up, and not down. Women were used as secondary clerical labour, and although in many areas men were too, such as Assistant Clerks in the Civil Service, or the Minor Establishment at the L.C.C., it was in the typing and copying sectors that women were concentrated where they offered no serious competition to their male counterparts. In addition, the marriage bar ensured a high turn over of women which precluded them from being given responsible positions which had high learning curves and good prospects. In many cases, it was this concentration of women in entry-level jobs which subsidised the pay increases and opportunities for better positions for men between 1870 and 1914. Finally, as clerical incomes were household incomes, and as many female

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid. C900/07509, 'Sylvia Ward'.

clerks still lived at home with family members who were often clerical workers, their introduction into the clerical labour force in many cases had direct financial benefits for male clerks.

### **Angel in the Office – The Hostility of Male Clerks to the Breaking of Gender Boundaries.**

Female clerks not only had the potential to damage clerks financially, their increased employment also posed the danger of upsetting the gender boundaries of the nineteenth century middle class Victorian world which confined women to the private sphere and men to the public.<sup>72</sup> Gregory Anderson, for example, has shown the fears expressed by male correspondents to the Manchester Guardian in 1886 over the question of women in the office.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Jane E. Lewis has argued that, 'While middle class men...had no hesitation in relying on the arduous work of their female domestic servants they had no intention of permitting either their wives or daughters to engage in paid employment'.<sup>74</sup>

One factor which softened clerical opposition to the employment of women was the attitudes of male employers and senior management. This group effectively shared the same deep seated attitudes towards women as their clerks. Their use of female clerks was subsequently constrained by these beliefs. They did not, for example, use female clerks almost exclusively for secondary labour out of consideration for their male

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<sup>72</sup> For a discussion of the changing nature of the private/public sphere for British middle class families in this period see John Tosh, A Man's Place, Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England, (New Haven, Conn. & London: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>73</sup> Anderson, p. 59.

<sup>74</sup> Jane E. Lewis, p. 37.

employees, but because they believed that women's inherent gendered qualities made them able to perform only certain types of office work. As Lewis has argued, women were not only employed because they were cheap, but because they were also thought to possess secondary sexual characteristics – a quickness of eye and ear, a nimbleness of hand, a character which made them more inclined to sedentary employment, patience which disposed them more to repetitive and monotonous work – which were thought to make them highly suitable for the growing number of secondary clerical positions which were then becoming available.<sup>75</sup> On the other hand these qualities were thought to preclude them from the more demanding, 'intellectual' positions which were duly given to men. Mr Stanley M. Leathers, who as First Civil Service Commissioner was responsible for admission into the Civil Service, stated in 1912 that entrance examinations had a 'deleterious effect on the health of women.' This was used to legitimise the higher rate of rejections for women in the Civil Service and was supported by Dr. Wilson, the Chief Medical Officer of the Post Office.<sup>76</sup> The mechanical/intellectual distinction which had been envisaged by Northcote and Trevelyan for office work in the mid-nineteenth century was effectively realised in terms of gender less than fifty years later.<sup>77</sup>

Another factor that mitigated the impact of the feminisation of the office for male clerks was that for the most part female clerks accepted the gender stereotyping that was being actively imposed in the office. They accepted the fact that although they were office workers, they were also future wives and mothers, and that primacy had to be given to the latter rather than the former. There was subsequently, as Jane Lewis has admitted, a willingness to accept many of the limitations which employers and

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid. pp. 37-9.

<sup>76</sup> Fifty-Sixth Report of the Civil Service Commission on the Civil Service, 26<sup>th</sup> March, 1912, p. 12.

<sup>77</sup> Fourth Report of the Royal Commission on the Civil Service 1914 Cd 7338, Vol. XVI, pp. 6-9.



managers, no doubt with the support of the majority of their male clerical employees, ringed around them.<sup>78</sup>

A final factor which should be taken into consideration when discussing the reaction of male clerks to the increasing feminisation of the office is that many of these individuals were actively involved in the process itself. Twenty percent of the fathers of female applicants for Class II typists at the London County Council, 1905-14, were in clerical and civil service occupations.<sup>79</sup> Similarly in the competition held in April, 1911 for women and girl clerks at the General Post Office, thirty seven percent of the fathers of applicants for women clerkships and thirty three per cent of the applicants for girl clerkships were in clerical and civil service positions.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, in a period when access to clerical work was very much restricted by who one knew, many male clerical workers were able to secure work for daughters, sisters, and other female family members. It is important to note that throughout this period it was predominantly parents who decided what work their children would do. As Geoffrey Rogers said about the decision that he would become a clerk, ‘...I didn’t have any option, I was just pushed into it.’<sup>81</sup> Similarly, Sylvia Warde was ‘found’ work as a clerk at the Prudential following the doctor’s warning about her father’s health.<sup>82</sup> Clerical parents thus actively chose clerical professions for their daughters.

George Rose, for example, was not opposed in the least to his sister Margie finding employment as a clerk in London in 1910, even though this did result in her coming

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<sup>78</sup> See Jane E. Lewis, p. 42.

<sup>79</sup> London Metropolitan Archives CL/ESTAB/4/59-62, ‘Applications for Class II Typists, 1898-1915’.

<sup>80</sup> Fifty Sixth Report of the Civil Service Commission, Appendix II, p. 135.

<sup>81</sup> Geoffrey Rogers, p. 45.

<sup>82</sup> Millenium Memory Bank C900/07509, ‘Sylvia Warde’.

to live with him. He even admonished her for not trying hard enough to succeed in her office work. As he wrote in his diary,

That waltz you play so often, Margie, is extremely bad for you. It is voluptuous and sensual, and without a spark of intellectuality. You may take this as certain; that so long as you find such stuff exercises a sway over your foolish little heart, reducing it to the state of a flabby, pulpy inorganic thing, then so surely will you never improve yourself (as you talk of wanting to do). You will never learn shorthand, and you will be ready to throw your palpitating little coalition of weak sentimentality into the arms of the first handsome, soldierlike fool who cares to attract you.<sup>83</sup>

A week earlier he had written concerning her, ‘...as she has also failed to make enough progress in shorthand to justify Mr Muntzer in appointing her to Ethel’s [a female clerical friend of Rose] place next June one of the best chances of her life seems about to be lost.’<sup>84</sup> This was hardly the writing of a man who was opposed to women entering the office, and one could be sure in the case of George Rose that if he had an axe to grind, he would certainly grind it in his diary.

So long as women were segregated into the secondary labour clerical market, so long as they did not compete with men, were not given the same opportunities, and were forced to resign on marriage, opposition towards them by male clerks was muted. In a period when male clerical incomes, opportunities and numbers were increasing what else would one expect? Opposition was, as has been seen, expressed in The Clerk, but

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<sup>83</sup> Essex Records Office D/DU418/1, ‘The Diaries of George Rose’, February 10<sup>th</sup>, 1910,

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1910.

then the N.U.C. only represented a tiny fraction of clerks in London and the rest of the nation. Its lack of support, and its failure to arouse support by its implicit critique of female clerks may be seen as further evidence of the lack of major disquiet amongst male clerks towards increased feminisation. As even Gregory Anderson admits, by the turn of the century, with the realisation that there was no actual threat, opposition to female clerks in clerical circles was quietening down.<sup>85</sup> It was only in the Post Office, where as has been seen, women were used in more responsible positions, that opposition amongst male clerk was much more vocal.<sup>86</sup>

## Conclusion

At the MacDonnell Commission in April, 1912 Mr. Edmund Phipps, Principal Assistant Secretary of the Elementary Education Branch of the Board of Education was asked if he thought there would be any objections to the recruitment of youths into the Assistant Clerk Class of the Civil Service at an age when their education was imperfect. His answer is revealing and contains many of the arguments presented in this chapter on the effects of technology and women on male clerical workers,

...I think so. I think that the old conception was that the abstractor [assistant] class would do nothing but such very simple duties as made it matter very little what sort of person they were. I think nowadays we have got away from that; we have steadily shifted the simpler jobs out of the way. Thus, we have employed women typists to do the great mass of copying that was supposed to be the regular work of abstractors; we use telephones more, we use printed

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<sup>85</sup> Gregory Anderson, p. 60.

<sup>86</sup> See Cohn, pp. 142-152.

forms instead of copying, we use carbon copies in type-writers. Therefore we do away with such simple work. So the abstractor clerk is doing undoubtedly very much superior work, certainly in the Board of Education and other offices, than his class was ever designed to do, and I think it is a very serious thing for the Service to have a great mass of men brought in at a salary which will rise to £150, which they will reach between 40 and 50, who have no prospect beyond that.<sup>87</sup>

As a result of the increased application of technology and female labour to the Civil Service the Assistant Clerk, the lowest permanent grade, had had its work upgraded. On the basis of this, the grade pressed for an increase in their salary scale which was in the event granted by the Commission. Here is a clear refutation of the argument that women and technology deskilled and downgraded clerks before the First World War.

The feminisation, rationalisation and mechanisation of the office between 1870 and 1914 in many cases revolutionised the working environment for the male clerical worker. It created the modern office. It did not, however, result in the downfall of the male clerk or his demise into a white collar proletariat bereft of status, skill or financial income. In fact the very reverse appears to have happened. Against the background of these changes, clerical incomes, skill levels and opportunities increased. Clearly there was some link. Technology upgraded work by obviating the need to perform unskilled, repetitive work. It demanded in some cases the learning of completely new skills, and in others the need to re-skill in order to perform the same

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<sup>87</sup> Fifty-Sixth Report of the Civil Service Commission, 26<sup>th</sup> April, 1912-13, p. 33.

office tasks. Similarly women clerks upgraded male clerical work by having inferior work downgraded to them. They also contributed to increasing male incomes by acting as a cheap source of labour in secondary clerical labour markets, and by augmenting family incomes.

What is as important is that the inauguration of the two did not meet with the degree of hostility from male clerks that has been suggested. If one wants to look for opposition in the complaint literature of this period one will certainly find it. The same is the case for the Victorian and Edwardian press. These papers, particularly the emerging sensationalist press, in their aim to increase sales, were keen to foster an atmosphere of controversy and crisis rather than one of consensus and calm.<sup>88</sup> This is not to argue that there was no opposition, it is only to say that its degree should not be exaggerated. Clerical journals did not universally condemn the changes. Diary entries and interviews fail to give a sense of foreboding or opposition. Company records do not, on the whole, suggest resentment. It would appear that male clerks were quite sanguine about changes which were clearly, in most cases, in their interests.

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<sup>88</sup> See Jean K. Chalaby, The Invention of Journalism, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998), pp. 147-66.

## Chapter VI

### Education, Merit and Patronage – The London Clerical Market

Key to any analysis of clerical workers in London in the Late Victorian and Edwardian period is a discussion of education. Clerks were essentially ‘brain workers’, a term which, as has been seen in previous chapters, was as much ascriptive as it was prescriptive. In terms of a clerk’s usefulness, market value and relative status, intellectual capital was almost as important as vocational skill. In many cases the distinction was immaterial. In this sense, a clerk’s education was central to his professional career. As Sidney Webb, former chairman of the Technical Education Committee of the London County Council and a major commentator at the time on education, noted in his work on London education in 1904, what a clerk was professionally capable of rested in large part on the education he had received.<sup>1</sup> The knowledge of languages, the business organisations of other countries, the intricacies of currencies and international exchanges, foreign tariffs and port dues, new taxes or commercial laws, the ability to calculate actuarial probabilities and insurance risks, even the capacity to apply one’s intellect to solve a minor problem, all of these skills and items of knowledge could not be simply ‘picked up’, but to a large extent were dependent on the mental training that one had learnt at school and college.<sup>2</sup>

Education is also an important topic in relation to clerks because of the putative effects that expanding state provided education were said to have had on the profession. Whereas it was argued that earlier in the nineteenth century clerks had a

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<sup>1</sup> Sidney Webb, London Education, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1904), p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

relatively high and secure status due to the scarcity of their essential skills of literacy and numeracy, the provision of these by the state following Forster's Education Act in 1870 and later legislation was said to have made these skills widespread and thus undermined their position. The result, it was argued was an over supply of clerks in the market and a subsequent fall in the market position of the clerical worker.<sup>3</sup> Murray Fernie, who as has been seen in the previous chapter protested against the spread of technology in offices, also remonstrated against state sponsored education. In his opinion, '...the typewriter has accelerated that lowering of clerical remuneration which *has been steadily going on since the passing of the early Education Acts.* [my italics]'.<sup>4</sup> The National Union of Clerks and The Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries both demanded legislation to raise the school-leaving age so as to postpone entry into office work. They also wanted counselling in schools to warn students against considering work in an 'overcrowded' clerical market.<sup>5</sup>

Nearly seventy years later Gregory Anderson echoed these sentiments. Anderson argued in his conclusion that in the latter half of the nineteenth century the clerk had embarked upon his steady decline into proletarian oblivion, and made a strong link between this voyage and the widespread availability of elementary education;

...While there existed, as there did before the 1870s, a marked differential between educated, literate clerks and the great mass of the relatively uneducated working class, clerks were secure. Once popular education expanded, however, that essentially fragile differential between clerks and the

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<sup>3</sup> See *The Clerk*, January, 1908, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, April, 1910, p. 63.

<sup>5</sup> See Lee Holcombe, *Victorian Ladies at Work, Middle Class Working Women in England and Wales, 1850-1914*, (Newton Abbott: David & Charles, 1973), p. 157.

rest of the working class was further narrowed when the relative economic position of many workers, given the rise in real wages, improved in the last decades of the century.<sup>6</sup>

Education was thus key to the relative status of the clerical worker between 1870 and 1914. Much of the current argument on the demise of the clerk for this period rests on the simple premise that more state provided education led to a proportionate decline in the position of the hapless office worker.

Having given the background to the importance of education for clerks in the later half of the nineteenth century this chapter will concentrate on asking whether the provision of universal elementary education by the state after 1870 was so detrimental to the overall welfare of the clerk. It will argue that while near universal elementary education did indeed have wide ranging effects (not necessarily negative) on the clerical profession, not enough attention has been paid to the spread of secondary education, particularly in London, in the same period. While elementary education may have made more widely available basic clerical skills to a wider populace, the improvement and expansion of secondary education meant that many clerks were able to counter this and perpetuate an intellectual, social and cultural distinction between themselves and the working classes.

The expansion of secondary education between 1870 and 1914 and its effects on the clerical labour market will consequently be analysed in detail. To begin with the growth of secondary education in London between 1869 and 1914 will be examined.

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<sup>6</sup> Gregory Anderson, Victorian Clerks, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), p. 129.



Following this, the centrality of secondary education to clerks will be discussed. An examination of the recruitment structure of the London clerical labour market will follow in order to understand what role secondary education played in assisting its students in finding clerical work. In relation to this, the increasing importance of public examinations in the second half of the nineteenth century will be commented upon. After this, the educational backgrounds of successful second division clerks in the Civil Service and in Glyn's Bank and the occupations of their fathers will be analysed to demonstrate the growing importance of secondary education to clerical work.

## **Secondary Education**

### **The Growth of Secondary Education in London**

In 1903 the London Education Authority was created. The London School Board along with many of the city's endowed grammar schools were now incorporated with the Technical Education Board (of the L.C.C.) into one overarching educational body under the control of the London County Council.<sup>7</sup> For the first time in its history the capital had an institutional body which was responsible for the provision of education from elementary schools through to grammar schools, technical colleges, the polytechnics, specialist schools and the University of London. What was more, the body had full statutory powers to raise taxes in order to fund its educational policies.

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the 1902 Balfour Education Act, and its 1903 version for London, see the conclusion of John Roach, Secondary Education in England 1870-1902, (London: Routledge, 1991). See also Sidney Webb. The Fabian Society, Fabian Tract No. 117. The London Education Act: How to Make the Best of it, (London: The Fabian Society, 1904)

Such was the backdrop to Sidney Webb's comprehensive survey of the educational institutions that the new authority had under its control, London Education.<sup>8</sup> In addition to meticulously discussing the future educational needs and challenges of London and its inhabitants, Webb also provided an in-depth study of what had been achieved in educational provision in the capital over the last forty or so years. The result was impressive. From a system which had previously relied on the voluntary sector with sparse governmental support had evolved a partnership between public and private bodies which, while not perhaps universal, had made great inroads into providing education for a broad range of London's populace.

Discussing the achievements of the former London School Board, Webb reeled off an impressive range of statistics made possible by the 1870 Education Act; half a million additional children in elementary education on top of the 300,000 who had previously been catered for by the voluntary sector, five hundred new public buildings occupying six hundred acres of valuable land, a school in every one of London's electoral districts, four to the square mile of the whole of the city's surface, a total of fourteen million sterling expended on the whole enterprise.<sup>9</sup> It was not only a question of quantity, however. Under state provision and inspection, standards had been raised and education had come to be seen not as an act of charity but as a crucial requirement for the well-being of the individual and more specifically for the state and society. It was indeed this principal which was said to have been inscribed in the 1902-3 Education Acts.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Webb, London Education, passim.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

As well as discussing elementary education, Webb also examined the state of secondary education in London. The capital had no less than 25,000 boys and girls in its secondary schools, a figure, according to Webb, larger than either Paris or Berlin.<sup>11</sup> In addition to this figure was a further layer of private ‘commercial academies’ and colleges for ‘young ladies of the genteel suburbs’; a group that Webb saw as complementing rather than competing with public provision.<sup>12</sup> In addition to growth in student numbers, from an estimated number of 12,500 in 1892<sup>13</sup>, many of these schools had been equipped with modern buildings, science laboratories and suitable equipment. Efficiency still, however, varied between the schools and staffing in many remained a weak point.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, the change in secondary education over the last thirty-five years in London and the nation as a whole, while not up to the same degree as elementary education, had been substantial. The change had begun in 1869 with the passing of the Endowed Schools Act. The Act, which can be seen as precipitating the beginning of the modern grammar school in England and Wales, established the Endowed School Commission whose job it was to reform existing educational endowments in the country, particularly those that related to the grammar schools.<sup>15</sup> While the act did not specifically set out to create a tier of secondary education, or concentrate on this area *per se*, it had been heavily influenced by the report of the Schools Inquiry

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<sup>11</sup> According to London County Council London Statistics. Vol. XXIV. 1913-14, pp. 409-11, there were 25,664 students in secondary schools recognised as efficient by the Board of Education, and 24,114 in secondary schools on the grant list of the Board of Education. This figure did not include private schools of which there were estimated to be at least 468 in London in December 1908 with an estimated 27,000 students. Most of these would have been young students however. Out of 158 of these schools with 8,995 students, 58% were under 12, 22% were aged 12-14 and 20% were over 14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> Sir Hubert Llewelyn-Smith and Arthur Acland, Studies in Secondary Education, (London: Percival & Co., 1892) p. 147.

<sup>14</sup> Sidney Webb, p. 30.

<sup>15</sup> See the first chapter of John Roach, Secondary Education in England 1870-1902

Commission, 1868 which had spoken of the importance of the grammar school endowments and the need to reform them, the Taunton Report of 1868 which had established a template for a modern secondary school system, and by the call of Mathew Arnold in the 1860s for the need of such a system of national education to cater for the needs of the growing middle classes.<sup>16</sup>

The reform of the grammar schools and the expansion of secondary education had direct relevance to clerical workers in London. Clerks as members of a loose but broad based middle class, were a principal group who benefited from the work of the Commissioners and the general reform of the grammar schools which were so clearly directed towards this social stratum. It was not only the extra resources that went into grammar schools which changed them but the whole ethos which the Commissioners brought which wrought such a dramatic change in the schools. Individual merit, the guiding public principal of Britain's middle classes, became the principal criteria of who should receive the benefits of the endowments, and not the older ideas of charity, dependence and personal patronage which had sustained the former order. As W.E. Forster, vice-president of the committee on education, explained in the second reading of the Endowed Schools Bill on 15 March, 1869,

...Free education should not be given unless it was the reward of merit. The poor should benefit from endowments, not by favour but as the reward of their own achievements. The interests of the middle classes, who needed good education for their children, should be carefully preserved. The ideal of the future should be that no one class should guide the destiny of England, but that

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 244.

England for the future is in truth to be self-governed; all her citizens taking their share, not by class distinctions, but by individual worth.<sup>17</sup>

The upshot of this was that resources were taken away from poorer social groups who were often boarded and clothed as well as educated by endowments such as at Emmanuel Hospital, Westminster, and diverted to relatively less poor but more ‘deserving’ members of a rising lower-middle class.<sup>18</sup> This was done by the establishment of a series of scholarships and exhibitions. These granted free admission (or substantial discounts) to successful candidates to grammar schools. In some cases financial assistance was also given to students. The system was continued by the L.C.C.’s London Education Authority in 1903. The L.C.C.’s London Statistics 1912-13, for example, shows that there were 8,544 Council scholarship holders in secondary schools in London in 1913, over one third of the total number of pupils.<sup>19</sup> The main beneficiaries of this were children of clerks, shopkeepers and some skilled workers, groups from which the new recruits of the rapidly rising white-collar workforce were recruited, and which would later come to be seen as the ‘lower-middle class’. Llewellyn-Smith and Acland, for example, estimated that 74% of students at three secondary schools they studied in East London were from ‘middle class’ backgrounds; a group which he described as being predominantly made up of licensed victuallers, shopkeepers, managers, agents, officials and clerks.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, out of the 420 boys at Owen’s School in 1898, 129 had fathers who were clerks,

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<sup>17</sup> John Roach, Secondary Education in England, 1870-1902, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> London Metropolitan Archives 31.6, ‘L.C.C. London Statistics Vol. XXIV. 1913-14’, pp. 409-11.

<sup>20</sup> Llewellyn-Smith, p. 161.

agents, warehousemen and civil servants and the fathers of 115 were tradesmen and shopkeepers.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Centrality of Secondary Grammar Schools to the Clerical Workforce**

It can thus be seen that those groups who benefited principally from the reform of the grammar schools in London, and who supplied most of its students, were clerks and shopkeepers, together with some skilled workers. There is a large amount of circumstantial evidence which suggests that many of the pupils of these grammar schools went into clerical occupations. Discussing secondary education in London, for example, Sidney Webb noted, ‘...From the secondary schools comes a large proportion of those who enter city offices as clerks; practically all the bank and insurance staff and the civil service, and nearly all the sons of business men who are destined to succeed to their fathers’ positions.’<sup>22</sup>

An interesting source which provides an insight into the future careers of the pupils of grammar (and other secondary) schools in London is the Report of the Special Sub-Committee of the Technical Education Board of the L.C.C. on Commercial Education, 1897.<sup>23</sup> In addition to business men, the evidence of educationalists, including headmasters and teachers of secondary schools, was recorded in relation to attitudes concerning commercial education. Information was also given regarding the curriculum of some of these schools. One of the witnesses, for example, was Dr. Wormell, headmaster of the Central Foundation School in Cowper Street on the

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<sup>21</sup> John Roach, Secondary Education in England, 1870-1902, p. 75.

<sup>22</sup> Sidney Webb, London Education, pp. 109-10.

<sup>23</sup> London Metropolitan Archives T.E.B. 80/4, ‘Report of the Sub-Committee of the Technical Education Board, 1897’.

borders of the City. Talking in relation to his own school he noted that, ‘...over two hundred boys per annum go out to commerce in direct answer to applications.’<sup>24</sup> Mr. R.E.H. Goffin, Headmaster of United Westminster Schools, stated in a letter to the Committee that it had former students in almost every bank in London. He also wrote of his experience of the type of education required by, ‘banks, railways, insurance companies, actuaries, accountants, &c., and...for librarians and municipal officers...’, clearly suggesting that these were careers that his pupils went into on leaving school.<sup>25</sup>

What is interesting to note in this report is the degree to which schools tailored their education to those students planning a career in business or public administration.

Llewellyn-Smith’s and Acland’s observation that some schools provided lessons in bookkeeping and shorthand, in addition to the staple subjects of English, foreign languages, mathematics, drawing and natural science, was confirmed in the information provided by schools to the Technical Education Board of the L.C.C.<sup>26</sup>

The Central Foundation School had, for example, a civil service, technical and commercial department.<sup>27</sup> The same structure existed at the boys school of Regent Street Polytechnic and undoubtedly did so in other schools in London.<sup>28</sup> Asked about his opinion on the teaching of distinctly commercial subjects at schools, Dr. Wormell answered,

...we might recognise a certain number of schools having more distinctly commercial curricula than others, and boys whose minds are made up as

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 70.

<sup>26</sup> Acland and Llewellyn-Smith, p. 160.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Report of the Sub-Committee of the Technical Education Board, 1897’ pp. 14-16.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 71. See also, The Polytechnic Magazine (advert), August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1895, pp. vii-viii.

regards the future should select such schools. This does exist to some extent. If you take a map of London and get the boys to mark their place of residence you will find that the different schools draw students from all parts of the metropolis. The object of the parents in selecting schools at some distance cannot be on account of the small fees, because of the railway fare; they obviously have chosen certain schools because they appear to suit their requirements. I think we might take advantage of this fact and acknowledge the commercial curricula in a few schools...<sup>29</sup>

At University College School classes existed for bookkeeping, French correspondence, political economy and commercial history and commercial geography. Shorthand was available for a 'small fee' after school hours. The headmaster of the school stated that,

...A sharpish boy of 14 or 15 intending to enter an office between 16 and 17 would probably have made distinct progress in Latin, French, German, mathematics and arithmetic, besides his English subjects. I then let him drop Latin, give rather more time to modern languages, including if he will take it, a little Spanish and put him to commercial geography and political economy instead of ordinary history and geography, in which he may be supposed fairly proficient. He will almost certainly want to take bookkeeping, which is probably good for him, as giving habits of neatness. But a good many of these boys are not very sharp, and for them I do not crowd in so many subjects.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, pp. 16-17.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 70.



Similarly at Sir Walter St. John's School, Battersea, all boys intended for commerce took German in addition to French. As soon as the boys reached the upper fifth form they were given the option of spending half their time at 'strictly commercial work' which included shorthand, bookkeeping, typewriting and office routine, subjects required for the Civil Service Examinations or subjects necessary for the Cambridge Local and other similar examinations. For commercial subjects visiting masters were employed to ensure that these subjects were well taught, though it was noted that this had not been a success.<sup>31</sup>

Another factor which suggests that secondary grammar schools and other types of secondary institutes including private, county and technical schools were providing a large number of clerical workers in London is the fact that the age for clerks beginning work appears to have been rising over the period, from on average around fourteen to sixteen. Asked, for example, whilst appearing as a witness for the T.E.B.'s inquiry into commercial education, if he had noticed any tendency to raise the age for taking clerks into business, Professor W.A.S. Hewins, Director of the London School of Economics, answered that with the absence of statistics on the subject he could not express an opinion. Not to be put off by this, Rev. C.G. Gull, a member of the interviewing panel, representative of the Incorporated Association of Headmasters on the T.E.B., and headmaster of the Grocers' Company School, Hackney-Downs, riposted that, '...he believed that there was a tendency to induce students to remain at school until they reached 16 and a half years of age.'<sup>32</sup> Mr. Easterbrook, fellow panellist and headmaster of Owen's School, Islington, agreed with this, stating that he, '...believed that the good firms were not taking clerks into business as early an

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. pp. 70-71.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

age as formerly, but the inferior firms endeavoured to get them as young as possible.’ Reverend Gull added, ‘...in his own school he noticed that the age of leaving had been increased by twelve or fifteen months.’<sup>33</sup> Such an opinion was shared by the MacDonnell Commission which recommended that the Civil Service should recruit at an older age in order to reflect changing trends in education.<sup>34</sup>

It can therefore be argued that from the 1870s onwards the expansion of secondary education in London, principally via the rejuvenation of the grammar schools, benefited more than any other group clerks, tradesmen and some skilled workers. It did this by providing a secondary education which was exclusive in that it disqualified most of London’s children from attending, but inclusive enough, at around £4 to £8 a year for many of these schools<sup>35</sup>, to admit large numbers from the first two groups. Scholarships from these schools and later on from the L.C.C were also of great assistance, particularly to the children of skilled workers.<sup>36</sup> Improvements in secondary education preserved a middle class status for scores of families who hovered on the social threshold by bequeathing an education which gave them a distinct standing. As Felix Owen, whose father had paid for him to go to West Ham Grammar School for eighteen months, and who was able to procure a job in the City as a Junior Broker in 1918, stated,

I left school a bit earlier than I should have done, you were kept on at school until you were fourteen, I left St. Peter’s and Paul’s at thirteen and went to West Ham Grammar School for about eighteen months...I think mainly the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Fourth Report of the Royal Commission on the Civil Service 1914 Cd 7338, Vol. XVI, pp. 29-30.

<sup>35</sup> Seen Webb, London Education, p. 111.

<sup>36</sup> See John Roach, Secondary Education, p. 82 and p. 112. See also Acland and Llewellyn-Smith, pp. 161-163.

object was if I got put down on my C.V.'s in future educated at St. Peter and Paul Elementary, West Ham Grammar School, it gives you a bit of kudos you see...<sup>37</sup>

In addition, by providing in many of these schools a more modern education, with some even giving rudimentary commercial training, secondary education ensured that the provision of universal education after 1870 did not adversely affect too much existing clerks. This, combined with the rapid expansion of clerical numbers, meant that these clerks were able to retain the lion's share of the best positions for themselves, their sons and daughters. The report of the T.E.B. into commercial education clearly saw this distinction when it attempted to categorise the grades of those employed in the world of commerce or business into three groups. The first were, '...the great army of office boys, junior clerks, shorthand clerks, copyists, typists, junior bookkeepers, ledger clerks and accountants.' The second were, '...employees in more responsible positions, such as senior clerks, correspondence clerks, managers of departments, agents, dealers and travellers.' The third were, '...the great employers of industry and the heads of large firms and business houses.' While the report admitted fluidity between these groups, it nevertheless insisted on a distinction in education between them. Primary would suffice for the first, secondary for the second and university for the third. Education was thus key to advancement, those receiving one grade free from worrying over the social incursions of the group below them.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> British Library, Millennium Memory Bank C900/04111, 'Felix Owen'.

<sup>38</sup> 'Report of the Special Sub-Committee', pp.iv-v.

## **The Increasing Importance of Public Examinations**

In tandem with the growth in secondary education, a further significant development over this period was the growing importance of examinations. Public examinations in England and Wales can be seen as beginning around the middle of the nineteenth century. Recruitment by examination originated in The East India Company and the Home Civil Service in the 1850's. It was followed later by other branches of the Civil Service, the Military, the railway companies, banking, insurance and local government. Accompanying and complementing this development was the establishment of a number of national examining boards. In 1853 The College of Preceptors initiated public examinations across the country as a whole. The Royal Society of Arts followed suit in 1854. In the latter half of the fifties the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and the Department of Arts and Science began their own examinations.<sup>39</sup> These examinations became increasingly important for applicants for clerical work. Holders of such qualifications, for example, became gradually exempt from certain entrance examinations.<sup>40</sup> In addition, some firms began to demand these qualifications for positions within their companies. Glyn's Bank for example, around 1875 stipulated that, 'Decided preference will be accorded to Candidates who are acquainted with London and have already had some experience of office business; and also to those who have passed the Local Middle Class Exams of Oxford or Cambridge, or of the Society of Arts, or the Science Examination of the Privy Council'.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Roach, *Secondary Education*, p. 166.

<sup>40</sup> For an example of the integration of the public examinations into recruitment policies see the Great Western Railway Company, National Archives RAIL 258/400, 'Clerical Staff: recruiting, examination of, 1877-1914'.

<sup>41</sup> RBSG Archives GB 1502/GM/2036, 'Regulations Concerning Applications to Clerkships, Glyn's Bank, c. 1875'.

On the one hand the rise in the importance of examinations in Britain in the latter half of the nineteenth century can be seen as the consequence of an increasingly complex, bureaucratic and impersonal society. On the other they can be viewed, in much the same way as the reform of the grammar schools, as heralding the rise of a more individualist, meritocratic society. Impersonal systems of qualification would obviate, so it was hoped, the need for a system based on dependency and patronage. This was certainly the dynamic behind the Northcote-Trevelyan report commissioned by Gladstone, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, in 1853 into the recruitment of civil servants. The report, presented to Parliament in February 1854, led eventually to the establishment of the Civil Service Commission in May 1855 and the principle of entrance by examination.<sup>42</sup>

The supposed meritocratic link between the rise of an examination system which acted as gatekeeper to a nexus of power relations, and the reform of the grammar schools and development of a modern secondary education system can be seen in the fact that public examinations were taken almost exclusively, with the exception of the government's Science and Arts examinations, by students of the latter. Such examinations and the privileges which they brought with them were effectively limited to the minority who went on to receive a secondary education. An insight into the students taking these examinations is given by a list of the type of schools candidates who sat the December 1893 Cambridge Local Examinations, compiled by J.N. Keynes, the then secretary of the Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate; 2,350 candidates were from endowed schools, 1,214 from 'Other Public' (most

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<sup>42</sup> See Fourth Report of the Royal Commission on the Civil Service 1914 Cd 7338, Vol. XVI., pp. 6-8. For an examination of the effects of these reforms on the Home Office see Jill Pellew, The Home Office 1848-1914, (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1982), chapter 2.

probably private foundation schools which were mostly non-profit making private establishments with a board of governors), 1,536 from private schools and only 45 from higher grade elementary schools.<sup>43</sup>

What is in fact clear from these figures is that, in effect, one form of privilege was simply being replaced by another. Only a minority were receiving secondary education which entitled them to dominate a public examination system which was increasingly important for entrance into higher status jobs. The important point here is that substantial numbers of clerical workers were an active, if somewhat inferior, part of this exclusive group.

### **Recruitment Structure of the Clerical Labour Market**

Asked during his interview for the Millennium Mind Bank if he felt that his education was better than a lot of people had received when he was a child, Felix Owen answered,

Well I mean, my final eighteen months at the West Ham Grammar School, I can see what my father's idea was. I mean, that's been of great value to me all through my life. Much more so if I'd had to put down on my application for a job – Where educated? St. Peter and Paul Elementary, that sounds fine, but if you can say St. Peter and Paul elementary school and West Ham School, that sounds even better, I mean you will get the job. If there was any doubt, one

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<sup>43</sup> John Roach, Secondary Education in England 1870-1902, pp. 157-8.

way or the other, you would get the job in preference to somebody else who had not been given that little bit of extra.<sup>44</sup>

How exactly did this work? What were the dynamics of advantage which a secondary education gave? In order to answer these questions it is important first to examine the actual recruitment structure of the labour clerical market in late Victorian and Edwardian London. It is only with a fuller understanding of this that one can appreciate Felix Owen's comments.

Meritocracy may have been the guiding public light of many of the middle classes throughout this period, but patronage still remained the basis for a large number of those who looked for a berth as a clerk in London. Business Life, for example, wrote in 1902 that, 'One of the chief reasons why many who have acquired proficiency in commercial subjects fail to obtain a situation, although they assiduously watch the daily papers is owing to the fact that the best positions which fall vacant are never advertised at all'.<sup>45</sup> The clerical market in London for this period can be broadly described as a closed shop which was only very gradually developing, under the pressure of expansion, into a transparent and open labour market. Only the lowest clerical positions such as copyists or office boys, usually in small and emerging firms, were actually advertised. The more attractive positions, particularly in the banks, insurance companies and major commercial firms still tended to be passed on by word of mouth and personal contacts. With the exception of the Civil Service, including the Post Office, who one was acquainted with mattered just as much as what one actually knew.

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<sup>44</sup> Millennium Memory Bank, 'Felix Owen'.

<sup>45</sup> Business Life, July, 1902, p. 13.

An extremely good example of this system of patronage is the case of George Rose from the Essex market village of Chipping Ongar. Rose's diaries open in 1900 when he was 17 and still living at home and working in Ongar.<sup>46</sup> He was effectively doing two jobs at this time. The first was working for Mr Henry Child, who owned the local drapers in Ongar, and appears to have been one of the local business magnates. The second was working in his father's tailors shop, usually in the late afternoon and evening. In addition to owning the local drapers Henry Child was a director of the Ongar Gas Company and also held shares in the Ongar Waterworks Co. Ltd., of which his son William was secretary. Although not stated, it would appear from Rose's description of his activities in the 1900 diary, that he did clerical work for both the Gas and Waterworks, in addition to the drapers. This included bookkeeping, checking meters, and preparing, writing out and delivering bills.

In late 1900, Henry Child's son William prematurely died, and in December the Child's drapery business closed down. With this went Rose's various jobs. Rose was not, however, to be out of work for too long. His diary entry for December 29<sup>th</sup>, reads,

The year is closing, this book is closing, and my past three years of life is closing too. Today is the last, thank God. After all, the old place is full of recollections of Harry Child's poor fellow, naturally I can't help feeling backwards. What a variety of emotions I have experienced there, I have had practically three masters, I look back at the work with nothing but loathing but there is little pleasure in the thought of the departed family Cecil, and little

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<sup>46</sup> Essex Records Office D/DU4/8/1, 'The Diaries of George Rose'.



Nora and Trevor. Well it's Mr Wightman now and it's sacrilege almost, however I left tonight at 9.20 and posted a few letters for him, then father dictated a letter to Mr. Jones. Oh dear.<sup>47</sup>

Rose woke up at 7.0 a.m. in the morning of 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1900, breakfasted, and received a letter asking him to come to the offices of the Commercial Gas Company in Stepney, East London. He was given a long column of pounds shilling and pence to add up, and on doing this commenced a job which was to span his working life.<sup>48</sup> The Mr. Jones that Rose's father had earlier written to was Stanley Jones, a director of the Commercial Gas Company, who was described by Rose in the diary as 'my employer'. Stanley Jones was a relation (presumably the son, as they lived at the same address) of the local Ongar businessman, Henry Edward Jones. The latter was a director of the Ongar Gas Company and had helped establish the Ongar Water Works Company in 1897, both companies which Rose had worked for earlier via his connection with Henry Child.

Clearly, Rose's employment at the Commercial Gas Company, a well paid, secure position with good promotion prospects, was due to his family connections within the close knit village of Ongar. The use of the term 'Ongarians' in relation to work<sup>49</sup> and the frequent references of fellow clerks who came from the Essex village in the diary suggest that the nexus between London, gas and Chipping Ongar was made use of by other families in the Essex village.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., December 29<sup>th</sup>, 1900.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1901.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1902.

Other examples of these personal connections are common in the sources. Felix Owen, for example, got his first job with a firm of insurance brokers in Leadenhall Street via his father who was a timber merchant and insured his timber cargoes through this firm. As Owen said, ‘...getting a job in those days was very much a matter of influence.’<sup>50</sup> Andrew Carlyle Tait, who like Felix Owen lived in Ilford, Essex before commencing work, obtained his first clerical position at the wholesale and export stationers and manufacturers, Spicer, James and Sons in the City in September, 1904. Tait’s father owned a bookshop in the City and used his connections with the stationery firm to secure a job for his son. Tait noted in his diary in July, 1894, that, ‘...I expected yesterday that when our summer holidays were over I should have to go up to Mr. Spicer’s in Thames Street whom Pa has spoken to about me, about the beginning of September.’<sup>51</sup> In the event, Tait was forced to go the day after he left school for an interview at the company.

Contacts came through sources other than ones father or other family members. Church or Chapel were important centres of patronage and personal connections. Jim Hancock’s father, for example, was given an introduction to the London County and Westminster Bank through his father’s connection with the Congregational Church,

...There was a Mr. Campbell, a bachelor, who used to come to the family every Sunday for lunch at Stoke Newington after church. And he had come down to make his fortune in the 1880’s with a Mr. Nebittson who had become a very successful banker and who had been made Lord Glenn Dynne. And he, well it was arranged that he would be a referee for my father in the application

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<sup>50</sup> Felix Owen.

<sup>51</sup> Guildhall Library, MS-20383, ‘Diary of Andrew Carlyle Tait’, July (date not specified), 1894.

for the London County and Westminster Bank. And this was sufficient for my father to be given the chance of a job.<sup>52</sup>

Living nearby in Homerton, Hackney, William Evans was able to obtain his position in the office of the solicitors Ashurst Morris Smith & Co., via his connections with a Mr. Botwright, an employee of the aforesaid company and fellow member of Clapton Park Congregational Chapel in Lower Clapton.<sup>53</sup>

Family members too were very useful. Not only fathers, but also uncles, brothers and other relations would often help to procure positions for relatives in the offices where they worked. This is evident in the clerks' registers of companies such as the Prudential, the Great Western Railway, and Glyn's bank where the same names and phrases next to employees such as, 'Son of Robilliard, Clerk at Glyn's in Town Office' are common.<sup>54</sup> As a book written in 1933 to celebrate the rebuilding of the bank commented,

...Just as throughout its History the House has always welcomed as Partners the descendants of the old banking families which were connected with its formation, so in choosing its clerks, despite the keen competition to enter the service of the House, preference is always given to the sons and daughters of members of the staff and of the customers; and as a result of this it is not

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with James Hancock at his home, 26<sup>th</sup> November, 2001.

<sup>53</sup> London Borough of Hackney Archives Department, D/S/EVA/1-3, 'Diaries of William Evans', October 21<sup>st</sup>, 1882.

<sup>54</sup> RBSG GB 1502/GM/339/1, 'Glyn's Clerks Register, 1864-1918'.

uncommon to find that three generations of a family have been in the employ of the Bank.<sup>55</sup>

In a period when trust and knowledge of background was crucial, especially for those dealing in large sums of money, such a system was hardly surprising.

Another important source was school itself, particularly via the Headmaster. Schools not only facilitated their students by the education they provided, or by, as in Felix Owen's words, the 'kudos' they gave, but also directly helped to procure for their students positions in companies, particularly clerical ones. This was done in several ways. One was by simple advice. Headmasters would advise parents on which would be the best career plans for their children or even which companies they should direct them towards. As Business Life commented on the subject, '...There is not a school in the country whose Principal is not from time to time consulted by the parents of the Scholars in his charge as to the field of occupation for which a boy is most suited'.<sup>56</sup> In relation to its own educational establishment, the Pitman's Metropolitan School, the journal wrote,

...Mr de Bear [the Principal of Pitman's Metropolitan School] estimated that the number of parents and others who seek advice of the Management in the course of a year must amount to many thousands. It is one of the most important parts of the work performed by the heads of the departments of the School, to watch carefully the development of the students, in order that they

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<sup>55</sup> Eric Gore Brown, The History of the House of Glyn, Mills & Co., (Privately Printed, 1933), p. 178.

<sup>56</sup> Business Life, June, 1903, p. 139.

may be placed in the business world to the best possible advantage, as soon as they have attained proficiency in their studies.<sup>57</sup>

In an employment market tightly restricted by personal contacts and patronage, this advisory role of the Headmaster was clearly an important function for parents in addition to his more pedagogical duties.

Headmasters were also important in that they provided personal references for their students when applying for positions. This was a function, for example, that Dr. Wormell of the Central Foundation School, told the panel of the Technical Education Board of the L.C.C., he carried out for the hundreds of boys who went from his school every year into commerce.<sup>58</sup> In a period when, for instance, three character testimonials were needed for a position on the Great Western Railway, this was clearly of some importance.<sup>59</sup> In addition, from evidence from companies to the Technical Education Board concerning recruitment, there appeared to be a tendency for various companies to recruit from specific schools. Mr Thomas P. Chappell, of Messers Chappell and Co. Limited, music publishers and pianoforte manufacturers, for example, told the Board that the best clerks in his company came from the Philological School in Marylebone.<sup>60</sup> Mr Lorimer, of Messers Lorimer and Co., manufacturing chemists, wholesale druggists and exporters, Islington, stated that several of his employees, who started as youths at the age of 16 or 17, came from

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> 'Report of the Special Sub-Committee', p. 16.

<sup>59</sup> National Archives, RAIL 258/400, 'Great Western Railway, Clerical Staff: recruiting, examination of, 1877-1914'.

<sup>60</sup> 'Report', p. 32.

University College School. He also stated that there was a preference to employ girls in the company from Owen's School.<sup>61</sup>

Companies would also apply directly to schools for applicants. The furniture company Messers. Maple and Co., of Tottenham Road, for example, recruited their clerical staff from charity schools such as Spurgeon's Asylum and the Orphan Working School. This recruitment policy was said by its head, Sir J. Blundell Maple, to be in operation in other firms such as Messers. Debenham and Freebody's and Messers.

Schoolbred and Co's.<sup>62</sup> The system was not, however, confined to the Charity Schools. The two hundred students who Dr. Wormell stated went every year into commerce from the Central Foundation School were recruited directly on this basis.<sup>63</sup>

It can also be opined that other secondary grammar schools such as Owen's and Roan's received similar applications. It is interesting to note, for example that, when the London Chamber of Commerce decided to establish a system of commercial examinations in order to try and improve the quality of recruits going into business and commerce in 1887, it convened a congress to discuss the matter which consisted of businessmen and representative schoolmasters. The latter, judging by the schools where the subsequent examinations took place, came almost exclusively from the grammar schools.<sup>64</sup>

Contacts and Examinations, patronage and meritocracy; paradoxically these two diametrically opposed factors determined for many who and who did not perform office work, a key factor for those desirous of obtaining and retaining middle class

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p. 33.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>64</sup> London Guildhall Library, Pamphlet-6841, The London Chamber of Commerce, Commercial Education, 1895, p. 5 & p. 10.

status. What is interesting to note is that the contradictions between the two were neither acknowledged nor appreciated at the time. In 1904, for example, an article appeared in the Pitmans journal, Business Life, entitled 'Capacity versus Influence'. As the title suggests, the article asked the question what was more important in obtaining work, ability or contacts?

Whilst interviewing the manager of a large firm of merchant bankers, who had been making enquiries recently with a view to engaging two juniors for positions in the bank, we took the opportunity of ascertaining his views upon the subject of influence in the City. 'Which is the most important factor,' we asked, 'in helping a youth on to success in business life, the patronage of influential friends, or individual capacity?' The manager expressed his opinion that if he were asked to give a direct answer to the question, he should say that capacity was of more importance than influence, but he thought that given a youth who had been properly trained for business, it was distinctly advisable that he should be procured the best possible introduction which influence or recommendation could afford him.<sup>65</sup>

The answer was that both were important. You had to have ability *and* contacts in order to procure a position in London, especially in the City. The two were often supplied by secondary education, particularly the reformed secondary grammar schools. In addition to acting as an important mark of social status, many of these schools provided contacts whether through the headmaster or the institution itself. In addition, these schools afforded information via personal acquaintances, teachers, or

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<sup>65</sup> Business Life, June, 1904, p. 280.

the principal himself on how the system worked that granted admission to the more sought after positions. At the same time they provided the education that was required to pass examinations to prove that one had capacity which was required for certain kind of clerical work. In effect they were suppliers of social, intellectual and cultural capital. It is in this respect that these schools smoothly dovetailed into the whole recruitment structure of clerical work between 1890 and 1914, and why, as has been shown, there appear to have been such close connection between them and the wider business community.

### **Social Background of Clerks at the Home Office and Glyn's Bank, a Comparison**

The importance of a secondary education to office work can briefly be seen by an analysis of the backgrounds of two groups of clerical workers. The first were second division clerks at the Home Office, the second, officials at Glyn's Bank. It must be emphasised here that the aim is not to establish typicality. These clerical positions were not representative of all clerks. They were well paid, were extremely secure jobs, had good promotional opportunities, paid holidays and pensions.<sup>66</sup> They were consequently positions which were widely sought after. It is precisely here that one would expect to find a high number of clerks having a secondary education.

In the civil service entrance was meant to be purely based on merit. Second Division clerks were responsible for the more senior and supposedly complex clerical tasks of the Civil Service. They were sandwiched between the First Division clerks above them and the Assistant and Boy clerks below them. The class, created by the Playfair

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<sup>66</sup> For the Home Office clerks see Jill Pellew, The Home Office 1848-1914, Chapter V. For Glyn's see Roger Fulford, Glyn's: 1753-1953, (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1953), pp. 168-184.



Commission in 1876 were males, recruited between the ages of 17 and 20 by a competitive examination in subjects said to be of ‘an ordinary commercial education’.<sup>67</sup> The entry examination was, however, competitive in the extreme. As Business Life commented on the examinations in general,

...the [Civil Service] examinations are in reality competitive tests, in which the candidate is not merely required to attain a fixed standard of proficiency, but must beat his or her fellow competitors. In this connection, due weight must be given to the fact that the proportion of candidates sitting in relation to the number of vacancies announced is always very large. In a recent examination for girls, no less than four hundred candidates competed for forty vacancies.<sup>68</sup>

Similarly in 1885 the Thirtieth Report of the Civil Service Commission noted that,

There does not yet appear to be any diminution in the attractiveness of these appointments for the general public. Thus, whereas the number of competitors in 1876 was 370, it rose in 1879 to 1,269, and in 1885 to 2,075, the proportion being 10.3 candidates to each vacancy.<sup>69</sup>

Faced with such staunch competition, preparation for anybody entertaining a serious hope of passing the exam was essential. As Business Life continued,

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<sup>67</sup>Fourth Report of the Royal Commission on the Civil Service, 1914, p. 16.

<sup>68</sup>Business Life, July, 1902, p. 12.

<sup>69</sup>Thirtieth Report of the Civil Service Commission 1886, Vol. XX., p. v.

The student, having determined to try for a Government appointment, should at once place himself in the hands of an experienced coach. To enter into preparation for a Civil Service examination without such expert guidance would in most cases be a very hazardous undertaking...A competent instructor will be able to tell the student much that he will find indispensable to know, and he will put him through a series of model examinations, using tests almost identical in nature with those which the examiners themselves chose.<sup>70</sup>

Preparation was sometimes provided at school, as in the case, as seen above, of Sir Walter St. John's School, Battersea, or the boys day school at Regent Street Polytechnic. As many of the candidates were already working in other clerical occupations, a more typical method would be to attend evening lessons, either at the many classes held in the Board schools throughout London, the Polytechnics or private commercial colleges such as Pitman's. Even in this case, however, the overall threshold of the examination meant that a secondary education was imperative.

The centrality of secondary education to passing the competitive examination for the Second Division can be seen in the Report of the Royal Commission on the Civil Service, 1912-13. The report provided extensive information on the schooling of successful candidates and the occupations of their fathers. Of the 100 successful candidates of the September 1911 examination for the Second Division, 24 had been educated in London schools. The other 76 had been educated at schools all over the country, including Dublin, Liverpool, Leeds and Edinburgh, reflecting the national attraction of Civil Service positions. Out of the 24 successful candidates schooled in

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<sup>70</sup> Business Life, July, 1902, p. 12.

London, all had received secondary education. Most of these had attended secondary grammars.<sup>71</sup> The education of successful candidates outside of London broadly reflected this. Compared with figures from 1885, however, out of 221 successful candidates, nearly half had only received an elementary education. The rest were divided between private schools (58) and endowed grammars and private foundation schools.<sup>72</sup> As the Report of 1885 commented, ‘...The statistics given in the Appendix, relating to the 221 Clerks appointed in the year 1885, show that as many as 95 received their education in National, British, Wesleyan or Board School; while of the residue, only about a dozen were educated at schools of so high a class as that to which Dulwich College and the City of London belong’.<sup>73</sup> What is clearly evident from the information contained in these two reports is the increase in both the quality and extent of education that these successful candidates were receiving over the space of twenty-six years. While few of the successful candidates of 1911 were attending such first grade schools, far more were attending second grade secondary schools such as Owen’s School or Parmiter’s.

In relation to the occupations of the fathers of successful candidates in 1911 the largest groups were Merchants and Shopkeepers (22), and Artisans (17). In relation to clerks, there were six successful applicants whose fathers were civil servants and another six who were mercantile clerks. In addition there were three railway employees and four accountants who may have been doing clerical work, and one secretary. This would make a possible twenty clerical workers.<sup>74</sup> The dominance of shopkeepers, artisans and clerks as recruits into the growing civil service is

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<sup>71</sup> Fifty Sixth Report of the Royal Commission on the Civil Service Cd 6332 1912-13, Vol. XV., Appendix II, p. 130.

<sup>72</sup> Thirtieth Report of the Civil Service Commission, Appendix, Table H, p. 36.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. p. v.

<sup>74</sup> Fifty-Sixth Report of the Royal Commission on the Civil Service, Appendix II, p. 134.

commensurate with the groups from which the growing clerical workforce of London and the nation as a whole was being drawn. It also tallies with the groups who were the main recipients of expanding secondary education in London.

In contrast to the Civil Service, admission into Glyn's bank, like most of the financial establishments in London in this period, rested more on patronage. According to a booklet outlining the regulations for entrance into the banks, c. 1875, aspiring candidates had to have their name entered on an application list. This could only be done however, with the recommendation of a customer or someone connected with the house. When a vacancy became available three candidates would be selected and interviewed. Living in London, previous experience of office work and having passed public examinations were all important factors at this stage.<sup>75</sup> Capacity and patronage were thus both requirements for being admitted into the bank. Unlike the Civil Service, however, the former was useless without the latter.

Information on the schools that clerks went to and their fathers' occupations can be found in the Clerk's Register of the bank. In relation to schools the types of establishments that clerks went to who entered the bank between 1900 and 1910 can be seen as follows;

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<sup>75</sup> RBSG Archives GB 1502/GM/2036, 'Regulations concerning admissions to clerkships, Glyn's Bank, c. 1875'.

**Table 6.2**

**Types of Schools Attended by Clerks who Joined Glyn's Bank 1900-10<sup>76</sup>**

Type of School	Endowed Grammar	Private/Private Foundation	Higher Grade Elementary	Elementary Board/Church School	Technical/County High School	Not Known
Numbers Attending	54 (54.5%)	25 (25.25%)	1 (1%)	11 (11.11%)	2 (2%)	6 (6.1%)

Here again one sees a broadly similar picture. The vast majority of boys who were being taken on at Glyn's bank had received a secondary education, the majority having attended secondary grammar schools. The eleven clerks who had only received an elementary education could be put down to the patronage system.

Whereas the system clearly favoured more affluent members of society with business connections to the banks such as customers, companies with whom the bank did business or partners, it could also benefit poorer individuals who had connections with these groups. Sons of servants were one obvious example. This is commonly seen in the Clerk's Register with such phrases as, 'Former Head Gardener of Lord

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<sup>76</sup> From RBSG Archives GB 1502/GM/339/1, 'Glyn's Clerks Register 1864-1918'. Information on schools from Acland & Llewellyn-Smith, Studies on Secondary Education, pp. 192-9, The Annual Charities Register and Digest, (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1905), and Kelly's Directories

Hillingdon [one of the partners] who introduced him' or 'Lord Portman's huntsman – who introduced him'.<sup>77</sup> In addition, the bank with major connections with railway companies both at home and abroad, regularly recruited clerks from this sector. This could also account for those who had not had secondary education. A report from the Great Western Railway, for example, entitled 'Junior Staff Report', c. 1911, stated that, 'An analysis of Junior Clerks recently appointed shews that 81% were educated at Council School, 14% at Grammar Schools and 5% privately.'<sup>78</sup>

The occupations of clerks' fathers at the bank can be seen in table 6.3 below. Clerical I relates to clerks proper. Clerical II relates to those doing white-collar work, mostly commercial salesmen, warehousemen and shop/drapers assistant. Tradesmen includes farmers, of whom there were several, and artisans/skilled workers includes the work of 'dependents' mentioned above such as gardeners and huntsman. On several occasions a grandfather's or uncle's occupation was given instead of a father's. These have been included.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> 'Great Western Railway, Clerical Staff: Recruiting, Examination of, 1877-1914'.

**Table 6.3**

**Occupations of Fathers of Clerks at Glyn's Bank, July, 1884 to March, 1914<sup>79</sup>**

<b>Occupational Type</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Clerk I	82	29
Clerk II	37	13.1
Professional/Managerial	98	34.6
Tradesmen	33	11.7
Artisan	24	8.5
Labourer/Unskilled	2	0.7
Other	7	2.5
Total	283	100

While similar to the Second Division of the Civil Service there were some interesting differences. The number of sons of tradesmen and artisans was much lower, although in the case of the former, this may be due to some degree to different uses of categorisation. It is interesting to note the large number of sons of clerks working at the bank. This probably had a great deal to do with the patronage system. Many of the clerks at Glyn's were sons or relations of clerks already working there. In addition, the differences from the Second Division of the Civil Service may be due to the idiosyncrasies of the London labour market, in particular its large number of white collar and professional workers compared to other cities.

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<sup>79</sup> RBSG Archives GB 1502/GM/339/1, 'Clerks Register, Glyn's Bank, 1864-1918'.

Despite these differences, however, there are several things which are clear from the information furnished by the two institutions. The first is that there was no apparent break down in the social make up of groups entering these clerical positions, nor was there equally any 'invasion' of 'inferior' social classes into these much sought after jobs. They remained the preserve of lower-middle class groups with a relatively large contingent of skilled workers, many of whom were probably scholarship holders.<sup>80</sup> In addition, it would appear that a secondary education was a sine qua non of gaining a foothold into Glyn's and the Civil Service. In the case of the latter, all the successful candidates from London for boy clerkships were from these schools.<sup>81</sup> David Milne, Representative of the Association of Assistant Clerks at the MacDonnell Commission, stated in relation to this that, '...since 1900...the examination has become much more severe, and it hardly seems likely that a boy who has received no education beyond that given in an ordinary elementary school would have much chance of success in the boy clerks examination'.<sup>82</sup> For Glyn's and other London banks, a relatively advanced education was also important for an industry where administrative errors could cost a great deal of money. In many respects, however, these two requirements, a relatively high social status and a secondary education, were related. The latter was usually a result, and in many cases a requirement, of the former. They were part of the patronage/meritocracy nexus that was so important to the clerical market of late Victorian and Edwardian London.

This system was no less a part of the Civil Service entrance examination system, despite the hopes of its founders. As the article from Business Life made so clear,

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<sup>80</sup> See Acland and Llewellyn-Smith, p. 82.

<sup>81</sup> Fifty-Sixth Report of the Civil Service Commission, 1912-13, Appendix II, p. 132.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1912, p. 56



knowing how the examination worked, being able to spare the time and money to do this, knowing the best tutors, and obtaining information on the best preparation colleges were all crucial for passing the exam and entering the Civil Service. This point was precisely made in the questions and answers of the Bishop of Southwark and Mr. David Milne over a system of entrance examinations for the Civil Service which the latter had proposed,

(Bishop of Southwark) ...When you spoke this morning about the examination that you propose, would any system of preparation be required for that examination by these boys of 16? – Yes, I should take it that there would be.

That is to say, they would have to have some special training, even if they were at a continuation school, if they wanted to be successful in this competition; they must, somehow or other, get some special training? – It is so to-day in the Civil Service; there is a special period of cramming to be undergone.

They would have to go to Clark's College or some similar institution? – Yes to a college of that nature.

And the better the special training the boy can get the more chance he has of success? – That is about it.

Then, if he cannot afford to pay for it, however clever he may be, that means that he will not get in? – Yes, that is what it comes to, I'm afraid.

So that the open competition system is really putting a premium, unless you have a very extensive system of scholarships, upon those who have got most money? – That is so; that holds good today.<sup>83</sup>

Competitive examinations, it would appear, were never purely a matter of testing ones abilities.

## **Conclusion**

While it cannot be denied that the introduction following 1870 of universal elementary education had implications for the clerical market in London, the extent of this should not be exaggerated. There was no ‘swamping’ of clerical positions by a new army of recruits fresh from the Board Schools which were springing up all over London. Many of the expanding clerical positions were certainly being filled by these individuals. This is what one would expect in a society which was becoming more complex, in which work was becoming increasingly bureaucratic and implementing increasingly finer divisions of labour and to which Forster’s Education Act was in part a response.

Yet there are several things one should bear in mind. London was already educating large numbers of young people before 1870 in its Anglican and non-conformist schools, in addition to a number of other institutions such as endowed schools, ragged schools and orphan schools. Many of the new recruits into the clerical market

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<sup>83</sup>Ibid, p. 57.

continued to come from these schools and undoubtedly more would have if the State had not entered the educational arena. Moreover, it was not until 1880 that schooling was made compulsory, and then only until the age of ten. After 1899 this was increased to twelve. In addition, as was noted by Sidney Webb and the report of the Technical Education Board of the L.C.C. on Commercial Education, many of these elementary students went into positions which were the lowest rungs on the clerical ladder. Finally, as this chapter has stressed, attention must be paid to the expansion of secondary education in London in this period if one is to fully understand how expansion in schooling in the capital affected the clerical market. It is perhaps a failure to do this which has made earlier comments on this area distort and magnify out of all proportion the impact of Forster's Education Act on clerical work.

In relation to the extension of secondary education in London after 1870 this chapter has tried to show that the main beneficiaries of this were poorer members of the middle classes, in particular clerks and tradesmen, who appear to have made up the largest social group who sent their children to these schools. This was important in that such an education gave their recipients significant social status. Large numbers of these pupils went into careers in more prominent and better paid areas of clerical work, particularly in the City, such as the banking, financial, and insurance sectors as well as public administration. There were close relations between these sectors and certain secondary schools which assisted in procuring for their pupils such clerical positions. These schools were well integrated into the patronage network that was so important in obtaining clerical work in London. In addition, the spread of public examinations benefited students of these schools. Most of the candidates who took these examinations had received a secondary education, and these qualifications in

turn were increasingly being demanded by companies and local councils for applicants hoping to gain work with them. Such an education also benefited candidates for competitive Civil Service examinations. Secondary education was thus important in that it provided social and intellectual capital which could be used to advantage in the London clerical market.

The picture which thus appears is that as elementary education became more available certain groups of clerical workers and other sections of an evolving lower-middle class simply moved up the educational ladder into secondary education. In effect, what was taking place was educational inflation. Exclusivity was subsequently maintained, assisted indeed by the growing importance of merit proved by examination. The difference in the quality of education received by the successful candidates for Second Division Clerkships in the Civil Service between 1885 and 1913 is compelling evidence for this, as is indeed, the fact that the schools which clerks had attended began to be recorded in the Clerks Register at Glyn's from 1900 onwards.<sup>84</sup> It is this which partially explains why there was no collapse in clerical salaries in these sectors, and in fact why they continued to increase. In addition, improvements in secondary education helped maintain the status of many clerical positions by restricting entrance to selected social groups. In relation to this, it also served as a mark of social distinction. As David Milne told the MacDonnell Commission in relation to his members, '...You must remember that assistant clerks are drawn from boy clerks, the majority of whom are secondary school boys and have

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<sup>84</sup> RBSG Archives GB 1502/GM/339/1, 'Clerks Register, Glyn's Bank 1864-1918'.

been brought up in a fairly comfortable and decent home.’<sup>85</sup> Social and financial status were in effect secured for many by the expansion of this area of schooling.

The spread of secondary education was thus of direct relevance to clerical workers from a social and professional basis. Yet to concentrate solely on this sector of schooling when examining the effects of expanding educational opportunities on clerical workers would fail to take note of other equally important pedagogical developments. Between 1870 and 1914 there were two important developments in education affecting clerks in London who had already embarked upon their professional careers. The first was the growth and spread of commercial education. The second was a great expansion of continuation classes, particularly at night school. It is these two areas that will be discussed in the next chapter.

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<sup>85</sup> Fifty-Sixth Report, 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1912, p. 56.

## Chapter VII

### Commercial Education and the Clerk

On May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1897 the Technical Education Board of the London County Council selected a special sub-committee to examine commercial education in London. At the beginning of the extensive report which followed it was stated,

In conducting our investigation upon the subject of commercial education we have been greatly impressed with the feeling that the matter is one of supreme national importance. The great increase of foreign competition which has been felt by those engaged in almost every branch of commerce and manufacture has aroused a widespread feeling of alarm in the community. It is becoming more and more clear that among the principle causes which are threatening us with a grave diminution of international trade must be placed the better education enjoyed by many of our competitors.<sup>1</sup>

The T.E.B.'s report was part of a major discussion which took place in London between the 1880s and 1914. It was one which involved the press, politicians, academics, businessmen, and even royalty.<sup>2</sup> This discussion over commercial education was an appendage of a wider debate concerning technical instruction, which in turn was part of a much broader discourse over national efficiency, an issue which

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<sup>1</sup> London Metropolitan Archives T.E.B. 80/4, 'Report of the Special Sub-Committee of the Technical Education Board of the L.C.C. on Commercial Education, 1897', p. ii.

<sup>2</sup> Business Life, August, 1902, p. 15.

dominated British society at the time.<sup>3</sup> Since the 1870's, and especially following the 1890s, British business and commerce were coming under increasing strain. The reasons for this are complex and manifold. They can, however, be briefly summarised as a perceived failure to respond to overseas competition, especially from the U.S. and Germany, a lack of willingness to adapt to the conditions of the Second Industrial Revolution, an economic age defined by the application of sophisticated science and knowledge to production, and an inability to develop modern, manufacturing enterprises with their emphasis on scale, modern manufacturing techniques, organisation and scientific management.<sup>4</sup> The overall consensus was that Britain's failure to rise to these challenges lay in its outdated system of education, in particular its failure to provide adequate technical education.<sup>5</sup>

In London much of this debate centred around commercial education. As the national centre of trade, commerce, finance, and communications this was not surprising. In addition, London's emerging global position and nexus of an Empire which came to dominate its conceptual makeup and every-day life, meant that for many the perceived hegemonic status of the capital was intricately connected with this issue.<sup>6</sup> In the words of the T.E.B.'s report, the question was vital to London as it was the greatest commercial centre in the world, was the heart of the British Empire, and possessed more clerks than any other city on earth.<sup>7</sup> For the Board there existed a

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<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the National Efficiency Movement in Britain for this period see G.R. Searle, The Quest for National Efficiency: a study in British Politics and Political Thought, 1899-1914, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971)

<sup>4</sup> See S.P. Keeble, The Ability to Manage. A Study of British Management 1890-1990, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 2-4.

<sup>5</sup> See Michael D. Stephens and Gordon W. Roderick, 'Late Nineteenth Century Scientific and Technical Education. The Later Victorians and Scientific and Technical Education', Annals of Science, Vol. 28, No. 4, 1972, 385-400.

<sup>6</sup> For the centrality of Empire to London's business outlook see Jonathan Schneer, London 1900 The Imperial Metropolis, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), Chapter 4.

<sup>7</sup> 'Report of the Special Sub-Committee of the Technical Education Board of the L.C.C., 1897', p. ii.

clear relationship between Metropolis, Empire, commercial dominance, clerical workers and the importance of commercial education.

This chapter will examine developments in commercial education in London. It will first define the contemporary usage of the term. The growth of commercial education will then be analysed from the perspective of changes in the clerical profession. The introduction of new technologies and techniques, the attempt to professionalise, and the breakdown in more traditional training techniques, and in conjunction with this the growing bureaucratisation of office work, will be examined. It will then briefly chart the progress of commercial education in London. Four important institutions in its development will be examined, viz., the Polytechnics, the evening schools, the London School of Economics and the private commercial college, Pitman's Metropolitan School. Finally the attitude of clerks to commercial education will be discussed.

Much of the developments in what was termed 'technical education' in London was increasingly covered by commercial education. To omit commercial education is therefore to give an incomplete picture of technical education in London. Commercial education also crystallises many of the themes that have been discussed in previous chapters. It concentrates attention on the growing specialisation of clerical work and the attempt to achieve higher professional status, its bureaucratisation and the increasing importance of new technologies and techniques. Commercial Education, however, does more than this. It enables us to look into the psyche of the clerk and examine important aspects of his professional and overall identity. For the clerk the idea of commercial education represented key values – individualism, merit,



character, promotion and most importantly, self-improvement. It thus acts as a gateway into the conceptual makeup of the Late Victorian and Edwardian clerks which in turn helps us to understand why it was so important to many in this group and sheds light on why clerks came to dominate the further education movement in London.

Modern historiography has abundantly commented on the issue of technical and higher education.<sup>8</sup> In relation to London, the state of higher education, and in particular the growth of the polytechnics and the work of the T.E.B. has been the subject of a recently published collection of essays.<sup>9</sup> In all of this, however, the issue of commercial education seems to be strangely missing. In relation to the latter work, comment concentrated more on technical education for artisans and manual work rather than on commercial education and clerks. With the exception of a chapter in Gregory Anderson's Victorian Clerks and another in R. Guerriero Wilson's Disillusionment or New Opportunities?, nothing of note has been published concerning it.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Anderson's comments themselves are a cause for concern. Though providing valuable information on the development of commercial education in the North East of England in the Victorian period, these developments are depicted as nothing more than a last ditch, desperate attempt by clerks to protect themselves against an inevitable, encroaching proletarianisation. Anderson's overall thesis of social decline amongst clerks prevents him from appreciating the impact of

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<sup>8</sup> See for example E.P. Hennock, 'Technological Education in Britain 1850-1926: the uses of a German model' in History of Education, 1990, Vol. 19. No. 4, , 299-331. See also Avely Green, 'Technical Education' in History of Education, Vol. 24. No. 2, 123-139. For universities see Michael Sanderson, The Universities and British Industry, 1850-1970, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972)

<sup>9</sup> Roderick Floud and Sean Glynn (eds.), London Higher The Establishment of Higher Education in London, (London: The Athlone Press, 1998)

<sup>10</sup> Gregory Anderson, Victorian Clerks, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), Chapter 6. R. Guerriero Wilson, Disillusionment or New Opportunities? The Changing Nature of Work in Offices, Glasgow 1880-1914, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), Chapter 3.

more formalised commercial education and training on clerical workers . The historiography in sum is therefore almost silent on a subject which appears to have been widely discussed, particularly in London, and where it does speak out, it is in many respects quite misleading.

### **The Meaning of Commercial Education**

In the latter half of the nineteenth century commercial education was seen as a branch of technical education rather than a subject in its own right. At its most basic level technical education denoted a pedagogical system which was opposed to a purely academic education based on humanistic principles. It encapsulated a system of knowledge which was based on *doing* rather than *being*.<sup>11</sup> In the context of the latter half of the nineteenth century when many curricula were dominated by the classics, technical education became almost synonymous with ‘modern’ education. Llewellyn-Smith’s report on technical education for the T.E.B. in 1893, for example, defined it as including the whole field of education apart from ancient languages and literature.<sup>12</sup> On this basis anything from French to mechanical engineering could be defined as technical.

More specifically the term denoted one which prepared individuals for work and consequently assisted industry and commerce. Accordingly, there was no real difference between technical education *per se* and training. It was only those who were opposed to technical education, who believed the best place to learn vocational

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<sup>11</sup> See Peter F. Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Sean Glynn, ‘The Establishment of Higher Education in London: A Survey’, in Roderick Floud and Sean Glynn (eds.), *London Higher, the Establishment of Higher Education in London*, p. 27.

skills was by experience in the work place itself, who insisted on a distinction between the two terms.<sup>13</sup>

Commercial education thus had a very elastic application. It could mean on the one hand learning specific skills such as book-keeping, shorthand or type-writing while on the other it could stretch to more 'academic subjects' such as English, foreign languages, geography or history. As the subject matured into a discipline in its own right towards the end of the nineteenth century its definition became more finely tuned. This was assisted by the growth of higher institutions of commercial learning, particularly the founding of the London School of Economics in 1895.<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, an important distinction came to be made between 'ordinary' and 'higher' commercial education. While the former focussed on the basic skills needed for office work such as shorthand, type-writing and correspondence, the latter was concerned with more specialised areas.<sup>15</sup> At the L.S.E, for example, this included subjects such as the organisation of the modern business world at home and abroad, commercial history and geography, railway administration, banking and currency, and commercial law.<sup>16</sup> In addition, an important further development, which enabled the discipline to distinguish itself partially from technical education, was the observation that commercial education was chiefly concerned with the exchange rather than the production of goods. Commercial education became effectively the teaching of skills and subjects which facilitated this process. This came to encompass a whole range of disciplines from French to the laws regulating bills of exchange.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See The Office, November 24<sup>th</sup>, 'Technical Education', p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> See Sidney Webb, London Education, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1904), pp. 124-130.

<sup>15</sup> See Business Life, 1902, p. 52.

<sup>16</sup> 'Report of the Special Sub-Committee', p. xii.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 16.

## **Structural Shifts**

While a perceived crisis in Britain had a very real effect in galvanising support for commercial education, this was not enough to explain the incredible burst of energy and money that in thirty years provided a comprehensive system that yearly educated and trained tens of thousands of individuals. Such a crisis may have provided the fuel that powered the drive for a more formalised means of transferring business skills and knowledge to achieve critical mass, but it was deeper structural shifts in the business world itself that laid the foundation and ultimate success of commercial education between 1880 and 1914. These changes can be briefly summarised as the need to acquire more technical skills, the impersonalisation of office work and breakdown of the apprenticeship system and the professionalisation of office work .

### **The Need for a More Technical Education**

On October 13<sup>th</sup>, 1888, an article appeared in The Office entitled, 'Qualifications for Office Work'. Following a criticism of the English education system, in which it was argued that present day youths were not being adequately prepared for office work, it went on to observe,

The qualifications for office work must, in many details, depend upon the particular office in which a youth is engaged. But there are certain general qualifications without which no man can hope to succeed in this calling. Some of these are comparatively new to clerks of an older generation, and are not

yet sufficiently recognised as essential by those who have charge of our schools.<sup>18</sup>

The qualifications which the author had in mind were listed as bookkeeping, shorthand, foreign languages, and typewriting.

Clearly the technical advances and new skills that had been introduced into the office in the second half of the nineteenth century had to be learnt. Whether learning bookkeeping or exchange rates was better in the office or the classroom was for some a hotly contested area of debate.<sup>19</sup> For subjects such as shorthand, typing, and languages, however, there was a clear consensus that these were best learnt outside of work and under some guise of formal instruction.

Parallel to these developments, London's leading financial and commercial position and the growth of world trade accentuated the need for commercial education. The physical boundaries of trade, the number of transactions which had to be recorded and accounted, the number of products, languages, buyers, sellers and middle men that had to be dealt with on a daily basis had progressively become wider. Such a change in the spatial-temporal matrix of trade meant that a growing need for commercial education was imperative.

This point was clearly made by the T.E.B.'s report on technical education. Whereas, it argued 20 or 30 years ago a lad could enter business at the age of 14 direct from school and not suffer in his career, this was no longer the case. This was said to be

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<sup>18</sup> The Office, October 13<sup>th</sup>, 1888, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> See London Metropolitan Archives EO/HFE/9/37, 'Eight Years of Technical Education and Continuation Schools, 1912', p. 103.

due to three reasons; firstly improvements in general education meant that many more pupils were staying on at school until 14. The boy who left school for work at this age had nothing to differentiate himself from others. In addition, the extension of secondary and higher education on the continent 'for the needs of modern life' meant that this individual would be seriously disadvantaged when coming into direct contact with his European rivals. Finally, the report referred to the growth of world trade and the internationalisation of British commerce. All three factors led to the inevitable conclusion that under modern conditions further education for those destined for commerce was essential.<sup>20</sup>

The emergence of new skills which were required in the office, and the heightened atmosphere of more fierce competition and internationalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century meant that the entire environment and fabric of the office world demanded more commercial education. There was simply too much to learn which could not be done during office hours.

### **The Breakdown of the Apprenticeship System**

In the second half of the nineteenth century the old apprenticeship system whereby a youth worked in an office for nothing and in return learned the skills of the trade, sometimes living with his employer, sometimes having to pay a premium for the privilege, was steadily breaking down.<sup>21</sup> Writing on the subject, Business Life commented that a youth on leaving school would now instead receive one or two

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<sup>20</sup> 'Report', p. vii.

<sup>21</sup> See 'Education for Business: The Old Way and the New', Business Life, May, 1903, p. 125.

years special training before commencing work. He would then, unlike his predecessor fifty years ago, be able to start business trained in the routine of the business office and able to command a salary.<sup>22</sup>

While the article may have been slightly optimistic, there does seem to be some truth in the contention that older systems of training in the office were no longer as exclusive as they had previously been. As seen in Chapter II in relation to the banking sector, the habit of premiums and living in had broken down completely in the second half of the nineteenth century. In addition, as has been seen in the last chapter, the average starting age of clerks was becoming higher. Finally, there is strong evidence to suggest that the apprenticeship system as a whole across all industries was in decline. The Office in 1888 reported on an article from the Quarterly Review in which it was argued that the apprenticeship system had collapsed.<sup>23</sup> This was argued as being due to the introduction of a division of labour and machinery in many trades. The emergence of Trade Schools in London at the turn of the twentieth century, established by the L.C.C. in order to provide boys and girls with practical skills which it was felt employers were no longer doing is further evidence of this. As the Report said, ‘...modern industrial conditions are altering and eliminating the old methods and trade education, and ... are providing no adequate substitute.’<sup>24</sup>

One should not infer from this that the office had ceased to be a site of learning for young recruits. Equally as much in the nineteenth century as today, Britain distinguished itself from its continental neighbours by the amount of informal learning that went on in the workplace, be it workshop, factory or office. Evidence

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> The Office, November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1888, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Eight Years’, p. 63.

from employers in interviews conducted by the Technical Education Board confirm this. At the offices of the Orient line of steamers, for example junior clerks at the age of 16 rose up through the several departments. According to Mr John Bell who was connected with the company, they began by copying and then proceeded, '...step by step until they become familiar with voyage accounts, bills of lading, measuring, &c'.<sup>25</sup> At the London County and Westminster Bank the system was virtually identical. Discussing how his father acquired his work skills, Jim Hancock stated,

You picked up your work by experience. You literally were told that you were going to move to another section within the building and you were then shown what your tasks were to be, and you then had to learn them extremely rapidly to make certain you were competent.<sup>26</sup>

While this may still have been the case, the growth of some companies could have made this increasingly difficult. It is here, in the breakdown of the apprenticeship system and the increase in the size of some offices, that a more formalised system of learning became more necessary. London railway companies, for example, sent their promising clerks and assistant managers to the L.S.E.<sup>27</sup> Business Life reported in 1902 that banks and insurance offices in London had for some time made use of the Situations Bureau at Pitman's Metropolitan School.<sup>28</sup> In an earlier edition it also referred to the training of twenty or thirty clerks and assistants from one of the biggest firms in London.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> 'Report', p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Jim Hancock at his home, November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

<sup>27</sup> See Sidney Webb, p. 128.

<sup>28</sup> Business Life, September, 1902, p. 37.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, July, p. 4.



More impersonal relations between employers, management and clerks also contributed to establishing a more formalised style of learning. An important change in relations in the office was that employers and senior officials performed far less clerical duties than earlier and far more executive functions.<sup>30</sup> Face to face relations between them and their clerks would consequently have been less and chances to learn from ones senior correspondingly fewer. An article in The Office in 1891 bemoaned the fact that relations between clerks and their superiors was no longer as close as they had previously been and admonished employers to be more sympathetic and show more interest in their clerks.<sup>31</sup> The failure of many of them to do this may well have contributed to a greater need for a more formal commercial education.

### **The Professionalisation of Office Work**

In his work, The Rise of Professional Society. England Since 1880, Harold Perkin has argued that towards the end of the nineteenth century British society began to change into one based on professionalism rather than structured around land or industrial capital. This entailed several fundamental structural shifts. The social ideal now became the professional – the doctor, the lawyer, the accountant, the trained business manager – rather than the landlord or the industrial entrepreneur. Social ideals themselves became dominated by notions of expertise, efficiency and selection by merit rather than older concepts of property and patronage or active capital, production and competition. In addition, concepts of capital increasingly centred around human capital – what an individual knew, what services he could perform, his

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<sup>30</sup> Paul Attewell, 'The Clerk Deskilled: A Study in False Nostalgia', Journal of Historical Sociology, Vol. 2 No. 4 December 1989, pp. 364-5.

<sup>31</sup> The Office, January 24<sup>th</sup>, 1891, p. 32.

level of expertise – rather than ones based on land or industrial production.<sup>32</sup> Hand in hand with these structural shifts was the rapid rise of professional organisations, groups which were able to restrict entry into certain occupations. Between 1800 and 1914 fifty nine new professional associations appeared. These included solicitors, pharmacists, chartered accountants, auctioneers and estate agents. In addition, a number of non-qualifying associations were established such as the National Union of Teachers and the Institute of Directors.<sup>33</sup>

For virtually all clerical workers professional status remained no more than a distant dream. Clerks were unable, despite attempts, to limit entry into their occupations by establishing a stringent series of examinations and qualifying conditions.

Nevertheless, one must make a distinction between achieving professional status and professionalisation: the recognition that a certain occupation had particular skills and knowledge requirements, and that these could be proven by examined qualifications.

For some it also meant the establishment of non-qualifying associations. While not being able to restrict entry, these bodies nevertheless conferred status on their members, had links with employers and were usually active in establishing and administering examinations which contributed to controlling the flow of new recruits and salary levels.

In this sense, professionalisation certainly took place among many clerical workers from 1880 to 1914. A number of associations such as the Institute of Bankers, the National Association of Local Government Officers and the United Law Clerks

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<sup>32</sup> Harold Perkins, *The Rise of Professional Society. England Since 1880*, (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 2-9.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. pp. 85-6.

Society were established.<sup>34</sup> These bodies established stringent examinations for their members. The Institute of Bankers introduced preliminary and senior certificates from its very inception, the first examinations being held in May 1880. The examinations were a combination of papers in arithmetic and algebra, bookkeeping, commercial law, political economy and practical banking.<sup>35</sup> By 1906 the examinations were being taken in 376 centres across Britain and even overseas in cities such as Bombay, Cape Town, Hong Kong and Yokohama.<sup>36</sup>

In addition, the growth of public commercial examinations assisted this process. In 1902 there were 276 centres of examination for the Society of Arts with nearly 10,000 papers taken.<sup>37</sup> Such examinations were symptomatic of the professionalisation of society and the increased value attached to knowledge and ability. As such, they were proof of merit which could be used as symbols of human capital and exchanged for professional positions. According to Business Life, 'Certificates of efficiency, when gained from a recognised public examining body, are certainly very valuable documents to possess as evidence of capacity proved by undergoing definite tests.'<sup>38</sup> Those for shorthand and typing were singled out as being particularly valuable.

In the context of professionalisation, the growth of formal commercial education is clearly discernable. In London institutions such as Birkbeck College, City of London College, King's College and the Young Men's Christian Institute set up classes for the Institute of Bankers examinations as recognised centres. At the Birkbeck Institute, for

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<sup>34</sup> For the Institute of Bankers see Edwin Green, A History of The Institute of Bankers, 1879-1979, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1979). For the United Law Clerks Society see London Metropolitan Archives, ACC/1559, 'United Law Clerks Society, 1832-1979'.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56-7.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 86.

<sup>37</sup> Business Life, August, 1902, p. 17.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, December, 1902, p. 66. See also January 1903, p. 111.

example, students for the session 1896-7 took examinations from the following bodies; University Extension society (Political Economy), University Extension Society, (Commercial Geography), Institute of Bankers, Institute of Actuaries, Institute of Chartered Accountants, The London Chamber of Commerce, The Society of Arts, Higher Civil Service appointments and London County Council appointments.<sup>39</sup> Formal Institutes of commercial education and examining bodies were symptomatic of a shift in society which placed increasing importance on knowledge. This had marked effects for clerical workers and all those involved in the business world and public administration. It is partially in this development that growth in these institutions and the rise of commercial education can be located.

### **The Development of Commercial Education In London**

Just as commercial education developed out of technical education, the evolution of institutions where the two could be learnt were closely related. Throughout the nineteenth century progress was haphazard, uneven and sometimes opportunistic rather than systematically thought out and implemented.<sup>40</sup> In London where no one industry dominated, but rather a cacophony of industrial, commercial, financial, professional, transport, service and other activities characterised its economy, the situation was even more fluid. What made the situation still more complex were the several economic, social and political faces of London. Industrial centre, global metropole, hub of empire, transport interface, political and administrative axis; all of these were London. Educational provision was also varied both in terms of source and

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<sup>39</sup> 'Report', p. 74.

<sup>40</sup> See 'Eight Years', p. 12, and Sean Glynn, 'The Establishment of Higher Education in London', p. 4.

character. Voluntary societies, philanthropic individuals, private companies, and local and central government were all involved in building up its structure. It was not until towards the end of the nineteenth century that systematisation and co-ordination began to take place, and not until the establishment of the London Education Authority in 1903 that one can begin to talk in any real sense of an education system in the capital.<sup>41</sup>

Gregory Anderson has commented on the relative backwardness of Britain in this field compared to its principal competitors. Victorian Britain was said to have had, ‘... no institution worthy of comparison with the Paris School of Commerce founded in 1820, the Superior Institute of Commerce in Antwerp or America’s chain of thirty commercial colleges.’<sup>42</sup> These were certainly sentiments echoed at the time. The T.E.B.’s report on commercial education eulogised the Leipzig and Antwerp commercial institutes on the continent, comparing them to the backwardness of the Capital.<sup>43</sup> The ‘backward looking’ tendency of British firms to train their workers ‘on the job’ was seen as damaging to both individual and nation.

From the 1880s to the 1900s, however, this situation had radically improved. In his section on commercial education in London, Sidney Webb made three important comments concerning the state of the subject in the capital in the years running up to the outbreak of war in 1914.<sup>44</sup> There was a lot more of it available than was fully appreciated at the time. Furthermore, from the 1880s great progress had been made in

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<sup>41</sup> For an overall discussion of the development of technical education in nineteenth century London see E.P. Henlock, ‘Technological Education in England, 1850-1926’, and Sean Glynn, ‘The Establishment of Higher Education in London: A Survey’. See also, ‘Eight Years’, pp. 1-11.

<sup>42</sup> Anderson, , p. 90.

<sup>43</sup> The Office, September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1888, p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> Sidney Webb, p. 97.

the provision of this type of education. Finally, the supply and content of commercial education had been systematically laid out. Between 1880 and 1914 commercial education had transformed itself from a haphazard collection of subjects taught in predominantly voluntary organisations such as the Mechanics Institutes and the Y.M.C.A. to a systematic discipline taught in a number of well funded educational institutions catering for all needs and levels. By 1914 the subject had very much come into its own right as a field of learning.

A key player in the development of commercial education was the London Chamber of Commerce.<sup>45</sup> As a result of repeated complaints concerning the poor standards of clerks in London offices, the Chamber launched a full inquiry into the matter in the 1880s. It was found that offices frequently had to employ a number of foreign clerks due to what was seen as the poor education of native clerical workers, particularly in languages. The conclusion of the investigation was that British clerks were inefficient, particularly in the linguistic field, due to a lack of systematic training in contrast to their overseas peers.<sup>46</sup>

As a consequence, a conference of schoolmasters and businessmen was held by the LCC at the Canon Street Hotel in 1887. Subsequent conferences followed, a committee was formed, and the end product was the establishment by the London School of Commerce of formal commercial examinations and certificates which would test candidates in a range of commercial subjects including, of course, languages. As an incentive to take up the examinations it was agreed by all the

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<sup>45</sup> For the background of the LCC see Steven R.B. Smith, 'The Centenary of the London Chamber of Commerce: Its Origins and Early Policy', in *London Journal*, 1982, 8 (2), 157-170.

<sup>46</sup> The London Chamber of Commerce, *Commercial Education*, pp. 1-2.

member businesses who made up the Chamber, over 200 firms, to give priority to applicants who passed these examinations.<sup>47</sup>

The creation of the L.C.C. qualifications was accompanied by formal commercial qualifications by other bodies such as the Society of Arts and the National Union of Teachers. Alongside this, the rise of formal commercial qualifications was complemented by the rapid increase of institutions providing commercial education in London, particularly at night school for clerks already in employment. This process was assisted by the establishment of the City and Guilds of London Institute in 1878, the 1883 City Parochial Charities Act and the establishment of the Technical Education Board at the London County Council in 1893, each of which released substantial resources into technical and commercial education in London.<sup>48</sup>

Chief amongst the institutes which supplied commercial education were the Polytechnics, the evening schools of the London School Board and later the London Education Authority, the London School of Economics, and private commercial academies, in particular the Pitman's Metropolitan School on Southampton Row in Holborn. In all of these bodies unprecedented numbers of clerks participated in an endeavour to improve their education and practical commercial skills. While there were other important centres in London where one could take courses in commercial education such as the Y.M.C.A. and the Birkbeck Institute<sup>49</sup>, these four have been selected because of the extent of their operations, to show the diversity of institutes which provided commercial education, and to demonstrate the different types and

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. pp. 5-6.

<sup>48</sup> See Sean Glynn, 'The Establishment of Higher Education in London'.

<sup>49</sup> For details of the educational work of the YMCA see 'Eight Years', p. 77.

levels of commercial education available in London. Each will now be looked at individually.

## **The Polytechnics**

The history of the polytechnic movement has received some attention from historians.<sup>50</sup> What began as a ragged school in the 1860s in Charing Cross established by the merchant and philanthropist Quintin Hogg developed into a group of ten educational establishments by 1910-11 educating over 26,000 students.<sup>51</sup> Regent Street Polytechnic alone, the original polytechnic and blue print of all the others had a membership of 15,000 for the session 1902-1903.<sup>52</sup> While, however, research has tended to concentrate on the industrial technical side of the Polys, their important contribution to commercial education and clerks in general has been ignored.

Technical Education at these institutes followed in the tradition of practical training for professional life. Subsequently a very broad range of subjects could be taken from Electrical and Mechanical Engineering to Breadmaking and Cookery.<sup>53</sup> Commercial Education was an important part of this. The Polytechnics became one of its principle suppliers in London. At Regent Street Polytechnic, for example, its Commercial and General Classes and Special Examination Preparatory Classes, which predominantly prepared individuals for civil service examinations, were two of the largest departments of the Polytechnic. University Extension Lectures were also frequently

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<sup>50</sup> See in particular Roderick Floud and Sean Glynn (eds.), London Higher, The Establishment of Higher Education in London.

<sup>51</sup> London County Council, London Statistics, Vol. 23 1912-13, p. 395. See E.M. Wood, A History of the Polytechnic, (London: Macdonald, 1965) for the development of Regent Street Polytechnic.

<sup>52</sup> Regent Street Polytechnic Prospectus 1902-1903, p. 1. Regent Street had 8,886 students for the period 1911-13, London Statistics, Vol. 23, 1912-13, p. 395.

<sup>53</sup> See The Polytechnic Magazine for courses which were offered at Regent Streets Polytechnic.



held on commercial subjects. In the 1910-11 session a course of thirteen lectures on Commercial Law were given by Percy W. Millard, LL.B. The prospectus for that year noted, 'The lectures will be found especially useful by Solicitors Clerks, Bank Clerks, Clerks in Insurance and Mercantile Houses, and by tradesmen generally.'<sup>54</sup> When the London Chamber of Commerce launched its commercial examinations in 1890 Regent Street organised special early morning classes to prepare for the examination which were held each morning from 7 to 8.<sup>55</sup>

By 1910 these two commercial departments had evolved into two separate bodies. The Commercial and General Classes Department had become The Shorthand, Typewriting, Bookkeeping and Business Training School on Balderton Street, Oxford Street. Courses such as Bookkeeping, Languages, Business Practice and 'The Making and Sharing of Wealth' could be taken there. Course were held during the day and evening.<sup>56</sup> The Special Examination Preparatory Classes, or Civil Service Department, had become Clephane's College on Great Portland Street. The school prepared students for entrance examinations into banks, insurance offices, commerce and the professions, in addition to the Civil Service.<sup>57</sup> Both schools were affiliated to the Polytechnic.

The energy which Regent Street expended on commercial education was rewarded by the large number of clerks who made use of its facilities. Of its 8,700 members for 1888-9, 2,052 were clerical workers, by far the largest single occupational group.<sup>58</sup> Similarly Julie Stevenson has estimated that 28.7% of female and 34.0% of male

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<sup>54</sup> *Regent Street Polytechnic Prospectus*, 1910-11, p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> *The Polytechnic Magazine*, February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1890, p. 128.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, January, 1905, Prospectus and Class Time Table 23<sup>rd</sup> Session 1904-5.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, May, 1910, Advert.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1890, p. 279.

members of Regent Street Polytechnic between 1905-13 were in white-collar clerical occupations. For men this compares to 15.3% non-occupied, 5.3% student, 6.7% professional, 12% retail and only 20.7% manufacturing and 6% unskilled.<sup>59</sup> At the other London Polytechnics, the situation was similar. Replies from Battersea Polytechnic, Birkbeck Institution, City of London Institute, and Goldsmiths' Institute to the T.E.B. concerning their provision of commercial education showed widespread and comprehensive activity in this area.<sup>60</sup> Webb wrote of commercial education being given in daytime classes at Northern Polytechnic, Goldsmiths' Institute and other polytechnics. At South Western Polytechnic in Chelsea a regular day college had been established which provided systematic instruction for young men and women from sixteen upwards in all subjects needed by office workers. Describing it Webb wrote, 'It is not exactly a school, and it can scarcely aspire to be a university college. But it is much more than a congeries of isolated classes, and the extent to which it is taken advantage of proves that it fills a useful place in London's commercial education.'<sup>61</sup>

Similar developments took place in the City of London College where £25,000 from the Mitchell Trustees and City Companies was collected to build a new centre devoted to commercial subjects.<sup>62</sup> In many respects the demand from the Sub-Committee of the T.E.B. on Commercial Education in 1898 that more commercial education should be provided in first and second grade public secondary schools in London was actually met by the Polytechnics throughout this period.<sup>63</sup> It is from these institutions that a significant part of London's supply of commercial education came

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<sup>59</sup> Julie Stevenson, 'Women and the Curriculum at the Polytechnic at Regent Street, 1888-1913', History of Education, 1997, Vol. 26, No. 3, 267-286, p. 284.

<sup>60</sup> 'Report', pp. 72-77.

<sup>61</sup> Sidney Webb, p. 121.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> 'Report', p. xv.

to be provided. It is no surprise therefore that some of the leading business schools in the country today such as Westminster University, City University and London Metropolitan Business Schools originate from the commercial pedagogical endeavours of these polytechnics.

### **Evening Schools**

The efforts which the Polytechnics went to in order to provide commercial education was matched by the work of the London School Board, the T.E.B. and later on the London Education Authority in its evening schools. In London the number of people attending these classes increased from 9,000 in 1882 when they began to 128,464 for 1910-11.<sup>64</sup> A significant number of these took commercial courses, including foreign languages. Of the six most popular subjects for 1910-11, for example, three; Bookkeeping, Shorthand and French, were in this group. A total number of 62,140 enrolled for these subjects out of 104,652 for all six subjects.<sup>65</sup>

The role of evening schools changed in London throughout this period. Originally the schools had been intended as duplicating the work of the day schools for the many Londoners who had failed to obtain a basic elementary education. With the improvement in general education this function disappeared.<sup>66</sup> Increasingly the schools provided education for those who had entered work but wished to continue their education and enhance their occupational skills. By the turn of the century some of these had begun to provide distinctive higher grade education in commercial

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<sup>64</sup> 'Eight Years', p. 9 & p. 23. These figures peaked in 1904-5 at 150,605.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 61. Note, however, that 46.4% of those doing Bookkeeping, 48.7% doing French and 39.5% doing Shorthand made less than 14 hours.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

subjects, science and art and became known as commercial centres. By 1912, according to Mr. W.J. Chalk, responsible master of Barnsbury Park commercial centre, with higher grade science and art being taught at the polytechnics, technical institutes and art schools, nearly all of these commercial centres were concentrating on teaching commercial education.<sup>67</sup>

In 1909-10 there were 32 commercial centres in London with an average of 953 students. The combined number of students in the centres for the session 1910-11 was 31,814. According to W.J. Chalk, 'In a centre containing over 1,000 students, there may be from 50 to 150 separate classes in from 20 to 50 subjects with a staff of 30 to 70 instructors'. The subjects in these centres were divided into Ordinary commercial including shorthand, bookkeeping, arithmetic and typewriting, Higher commercial such as commercial law, economics, banking and accountancy, languages and Miscellaneous Subjects which included literature, domestic subjects, physical exercises and technical subjects. Demand for higher commercial subjects and languages were said to be rising while the other two remained stationary. In addition, courses comprising several subjects had been developed which students were encouraged to take.<sup>68</sup> Chalk wrote in relation to this of the need to create specialised courses for specific groups of clerks. 'Under ideal conditions', he stated, 'there might be preliminary courses for junior clerks, but afterwards there would be courses for accounting clerks, for warehouse and invoice clerks, for bank clerks, for insurance clerks, for municipal clerks, for civil servants, for railway clerks, and for others.'<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p. 50.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. pp. 51-2.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. p. 52.

These developments were seen as partially due to a change in the students attending the courses and their respective requirements. Chalk saw the development of higher commercial education and foreign languages resulting from students no longer wanting to learn mechanical subjects for work but rather those which would give them a grasp of the principles underlying their work. Clerks in senior positions were noted to be taking more advantage of the schools. Importantly, Chalk also wrote that prejudice against the schools from the middle classes was decreasing.<sup>70</sup>

Such a trend led to schools being increasingly monopolised by clerks and other members of the business community or those wishing to enter commercial and professional work. Mr. S.E. Bray, for example, district inspector of schools noted in his section on the ordinary evening schools that, 'There have been no marked changes either in methods or organisation, but there is generally an upward tendency, the chief aim being preparation for commercial life'.<sup>71</sup> Evening schools reacted to this shift by providing more commercial education. As Cloudesley Breton, M.A., divisional inspector for modern languages observed, '...it is obvious that the vast majority of the students take up modern languages in order to improve their command of them for business purposes. We cannot therefore ignore the professional and technical side of the subject; we have in fact no right to ignore it for the sake of giving instruction on more liberal lines'.<sup>72</sup> The high demand by clerical workers and those desirous of clerical work, and the upgrading and specialisation of certain schools into commercial centres bears in many respects striking resemblances to what was happening in other areas of higher and further education in London, including the Polytechnics.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p. 51.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p. 53.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p. 98.

## **The London School of Economics – ‘Our Commercial University’<sup>73</sup>**

The L.S.E. was established in 1895 partially as a result of Lord Cowper’s Commission on the reorganisation of London University which regretted in 1894 the absence in London of a higher commercial and administrative college which would equal continental institutions such as the Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales in Paris.<sup>74</sup> In this respect the development of the L.S.E. was akin to the establishment of the London Chamber of Commerce Examinations and the Polytechnics in that all three were reactions to reports showing weaknesses in English commercial education. The fact that it was set up at the suggestion of the London Chamber and with financial assistance from this body makes the similarities more striking. In 1900 Cowper’s regret was mollified by the establishment in the reconstituted University of London of a faculty of Economics and Political Science and the admittance of the L.S.E. as a school of the University.

While the L.S.E. was conceived as an academic institution, it was equally seen to provide practical instruction to those already in business. As was spelt out by the Education Officer of the L.C.C., ‘The objects of this school are to promote the study of economics and allied subjects, and to provide courses adapted to the needs of persons engaged in public service or in the higher branches of commerce and industry’.<sup>75</sup> This point was earlier echoed by the Report of the Sub Committee on Technical Education at the L.S.E. While it recommended that the studies of the school should concentrate on the economic laws which governed commercial and industrial life, it also suggested that the School should provide practical education for its

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<sup>73</sup> Sidney Webb, p. 124.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p. 124.

<sup>75</sup> ‘Eight Years’, p. 74.

students. As the report recommended, 'It would also have the direct training of the future leaders of commerce and industry, and of the national and municipal civil servants and consular attaches, who it is hoped, do much to guide the commercial policy of the empire.'<sup>76</sup> Just as Imperial College, established in the 1900s, was built to safeguard the technical supremacy of the British Empire, so the L.S.E. was meant to protect its commerce.

Most of the initial students were working and studying part-time in the evening. These were engaged predominantly in business and worked as both principles and clerks.<sup>77</sup> In 1898, only 12 students studied there full time, all university graduates engaged in research. Discussing its students, the T.E.B.'s report commented, 'The school in the session of 1897-8 had 378 students, drawn mainly from the class of young men designed for or already engaged in commercial life, especially banking, shipping and foreign trading, together with railway administration and the national and municipal civil service.'<sup>78</sup> The affiliation of the School with the University of London in 1900, and the power to work for B.Sc.'s and D.Sc.'s in the new Faculty of Economics and Political Science did increase its number of full time students. In the 1911-12 session it had 194 students taking full courses. These were overshadowed, however, by 682 students taking separate lectures, who most probably were already in work, and 459 railway students. There were also 621 teachers studying at the school.<sup>79</sup>

The heavy emphasis in the L.S.E. on practical training was reflected by Hewins' comments on what commercial education should mean,

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<sup>76</sup> 'Report', p. xiii.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., xii.

<sup>79</sup> 'Eight Years', p. 74.

Judging from the experience we have had at the school, it is most important not to launch any general commercial programme framed to meet the needs of some hypothetical 'clerk' or 'businessman.' The students should be split into different groups, classified according to the trades or professions in which they are engaged, and after consultation with employers or heads of departments, who may be presumed to know what their assistants require, special curricula, suitable for different groups should be arranged. The organisation of commercial education therefore involves the organisation of the public, the clerks, businessmen, &c., for whom it is intended, and then the arrangements of curricula suitable for each group.<sup>80</sup>

These sentiments and the system of commercial education at the L.S.E. was very much in line with other developments in educational institutes in London of which it was seen to be an integral part. It was clerks, managers, businessmen, railway officials, civil servants and others involved in the business world attending part-time courses who were the chief beneficiaries of the School in its early years, and not full-time students. What differentiated the L.S.E. from the polytechnics, evening schools and other learning centres was simply that its level of learning was somewhat higher. Clerks and assistant managers from railway companies, for example, could take courses in railway law and railway accountancy, the application of economics to specialist problems such as railway rates and railway electrification, railway statistics, a comparative study of administration or relations to the state of the railway systems

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<sup>80</sup> 'Report', p. 1,



of other countries.<sup>81</sup> Such specialisation led Webb, one of the leading pioneers of the School, to comment, 'The new 'commercial' faculty of the University of London ... fitly crowns the organisation of commercial education in London.'<sup>82</sup>

### **Pitman's Metropolitan School – 'Learning and Earning',<sup>83</sup>**

While the polytechnics, evening schools and L.S.E. were public bodies receiving significant aid from the government, the L.C.C., and private commercial and individual donations, there existed also a significant private sector in commercial education in London. A glance at Kelly's London Suburban Directory for example for 1902 reveals on the High Street in Lewisham, Blackheath Commercial College.<sup>84</sup> Similarly Kelly's London County Suburbs Directory for 1904 show shorthand schools in Peckham and Forest Hill.<sup>85</sup> Many of these schools had only brief existences. Others, however, turned into solid educational establishments. Chief amongst these in London was Pitman's with its principal school, the Pitman's Metropolitan School on Southampton Row in Holborn.

The Pitman's Metropolitan School was big. Indeed, in its monthly journal Business Life the school often referred to itself as the largest commercial school in the world. Another epithet it liked to give itself was 'London's Business University.'<sup>86</sup> In 1904,

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<sup>81</sup> Sidney Webb, p. 128.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>83</sup> Business Life, July, 1902, p. 13.

<sup>84</sup> Kelly's London Suburban Directory, Southern Suburbs, 1902, (London: Kelly's Directories Limited, 1902), p. 1440.

<sup>85</sup> Kelly's London County Suburbs Directory 1904, (London: Kelly's Directories Limited, 1904), p. 1145.

<sup>86</sup> Business Life, August, 1902, p. 17.

for example, the School recorded a record simultaneous attendance in its school of 1,500 to 1,600 students. In that year between 1,500 and 2,000 positions in the business world had been 'placed at the disposal of the school'.<sup>87</sup> With students attending full-time courses during the day, part-time courses during the evening, and individuals from overseas leaning 'English for Foreigners' its total number of yearly students must have run into many thousands. The young Winston Churchill may not have exaggerated in the annual prize giving ceremony at Queen's Hall, Regent Street in 1904 when he declared that the school was, '...without an equal in the world'.<sup>88</sup>

What had begun as a school established to teach shorthand, was by the turn of the twentieth century a major provider of commercial education in London. During the day many of its students took courses for two or three years depending on age. Those joining at the ages of from 12 to 14 required three years and those starting at a later age generally finished after two years. The subjects were strictly practical and were designed to equip individuals with all the skills they would need for a career in an office. Students learned business composition, which included grammar, spelling and style, arithmetic, shorthand, type-writing, bookkeeping, commercial geography and foreign languages. In addition there was a Business Training Hall where students would roleplay commercial transactions, such as writing out Bills of Exchange, and office procedure. Letter writing in both English and foreign languages was also taught.<sup>89</sup> The school, like Regent Street Polytechnic, taught English to non-native speakers, many of whom subsequently went on to do commercial courses at the school.<sup>90</sup> In the evening students already in work would take these classes

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid. February, 1904, p. 239.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., February, 1904, p. 238.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., December, 1902, p. 66.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., April, 1903, p. 113.

individually. Exam preparation for the civil service, the L.C.C. and other public professional examinations was also taught.

The success of the school was partly due to the appeal that it made to its students' and parents' financial sensitivities. Articles in its journal such as 'Education as an Investment' and 'Educating the Parents' advocated the simple message that it made financial sense in the long term to spend money on commercial education. As was argued in the former article in 1904, 'Parents having a numerous family to bring up, educate and get out in the world, have too often but little scope for accumulating money to leave to their children, and realise that the best thing they can do for them is to help them to help themselves, and if necessary to make some little sacrifice in order that their sons and daughters may start with the advantage of a good and useful education.'<sup>91</sup> This message, loaded with such middle class concepts as self-help, self-sacrifice, the value of education and the need to prepare for the future was bound to appeal to what was chiefly a predominantly lower-middle class audience that desired a secure, respectable future for their children but lacked the financial means to guarantee this. With fees at £5 5s for shorthand lessons, £2 2s for type-writing and £3 3s for bookkeeping learning was not cheap, but just about affordable for this group. Payment was softened by the existence of instalment systems such as £1 1s a month or 5s. weekly for shorthand which spread the cost over a period of time.<sup>92</sup>

As a result of this, the School's journal was extremely frank, almost to the extent of being mercenary, in its exposition of education. 'Learning and Earning' was both a motto of the school and the name of a regular column that appeared in the magazine.

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., April, 1904, p. 255.

<sup>92</sup> British Library of Political and Economic Science Archives Division, BOOTH F2/3/6, 'Pitman's School of Shorthand, c. 1890', p. 22 & p. 34.

The salaries that could be earned in the City or in the Civil Service were regularly discussed, examples of students who had passed through the school and were in well paid positions were routinely paraded through the magazine. The argument of Pitman's was simple; education should be about acquiring practical skills which could then be translated in the workplace into accumulating money. Education in the country was argued to be old and out of date, hopelessly wedded to a love of the classics which in a modern business environment that demanded practical skills such as shorthand, typing, bookkeeping and a knowledge of foreign languages was useless.<sup>93</sup> To guarantee future success in the business world, a course of training at a school such as Pitman's was imperative. This argument was in turn linked to the dictum that changes in the business world meant that the old apprenticeship system was dead, employers no longer had the time to teach their juniors office skills, and that this role had been effectively transferred to business schools.<sup>94</sup>

The appeal of Pitman's message was further cemented by the claim that teaching was based on individual need and that following completion of a course the school would help individuals find work via its Situation Bureau. The latter was effectively an employment office where companies placed vacancies. This was a principle recruitment practice of the time for clerical workers and was only available to members of institution where positions were advertised. Such a system clearly worked to the advantage of all parties; the students received work at the end of their courses, the school attracted students via the bureau and companies attracted applicants from an institution with which it enjoyed a working relationship, and which to some extent had already trained and screened hopeful candidates. By 1907 Pitman's claimed that

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<sup>93</sup> See article, 'The Real Objective in Education' in Business Life, September, 1902, p. 27.

<sup>94</sup> See the article 'Business as a Profession', *Ibid.*, April, 1903, p. 111

its Situation Bureau had secured 40,000 appointments for its students. This was said to be not only a result of the great influence that the school wielded in business circles, but also because of its system of registering tests passed by students in its files which would be matched with positions which became available.<sup>95</sup>

Pitman's Metropolitan School had some differences to the other commercial educational institutes which have already been discussed. It was private, it put a heavy emphasis on the pecuniary advantages of the education which it offered, and it only taught 'ordinary' commercial subjects with no provision for subjects such as commercial law, statistics or economics. Yet despite this, there were many similarities between them. All were based on a common interpretation of commercial education which juxtaposed the practical advantages of their systems with what Pitman's had called, '...the trammels of an old effete system'.<sup>96</sup> Here it was not simply the content – i.e. shorthand as compared to Shakespeare, but also the methodologies of these systems. Commercial education was based on a direct, student centred method of teaching which was argued to have direct relevance to daily life. It emphasised the active skills of speaking and writing rather than the passive ones of reading and listening. As Professor Hewins had earlier said, it did not create an artificial universal clerk or manager but rather organised its teaching and schemes of work around individual classes and students. In addition, much of what these institutions taught such as languages and shorthand was similar, as was the fact that there were close relationships between these schools and businesses. Regent Street Polytechnic, for example, had a Situation Bureau like Pitman's.<sup>97</sup> Finally, all schools laid the same emphasis on the advantages of commercial education to individual, nation and

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., May-June 1907, p. 439

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., September, 1902, p. 27

<sup>97</sup> See The Polytechnic Magazine, January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1895, p. 54.

empire. Commercial education was seen as not only benefiting the individual but also the commercial supremacy of Britain's Empire.<sup>98</sup> The Polytechnics, the London School of Economics, the evening schools, and Pitman's were all to some degree or other responses to the same crisis outlined at the beginning of this chapter. It is therefore no surprise that they shared many things in common.

### **The Attitude of Clerks towards Commercial Education**

No fact more clearly shows the dedication and respect that London clerks had for commercial education than the 29,569 male clerks attending evening classes for the session 1908-9 in the capital out of a total of 92,944.<sup>99</sup> No other occupational group came anywhere near this figure. If one adds the 592 builders clerks and 560 civil service clerks and officials the figure rises to 30,721, one third of the total participants. The figure was correspondingly high for female clerks at 7,741 out of a total of 68,920. If one considers that around one in ten men were clerks in the County of London the magnitude of this figure becomes clear. Additionally, the figure represented around 25% of the estimated 130,000 male clerks in London.<sup>100</sup> If one bears in mind that the majority of individuals would stay in evening education for limited periods, concentrated in their earlier years, this figure would suggest that a large majority of clerks at some points in their lives would have attended evening schools, with most of them doing commercial subjects.

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<sup>98</sup> See the article 'Commercial Supremacy', *Business Life*, August, 1902, p. 15.

<sup>99</sup> 'Eight Years', p. 105.

<sup>100</sup> The 29,569 clerks in the Report represent 28.4% of the 104,025 clerks in the 1901 Census. Ibid.

These figures are borne out by the qualitative evidence. As has been seen in Chapter IV education was taken seriously by the diarists. Of the five, three attended evening school at one point or another, and a further one, Daniel McEwen, was an autodidact, who read constantly, wrote a book on his work, regularly published articles, and lectured.<sup>101</sup> Out of the Paul Thompson and Thea Vigne interviews a striking example of commercial education is Mr Frederick Henry Taylor. Though from Hanley in the Black Country, near Stoke-on-Trent, and not London, Taylor is interesting in that he was an invoicing clerk who worked in manufacturing – the pottery industry – rather than the commercial or financial sector which dominated London. Taylor ended his career as a cashier. During his fifty-two year career, however, he had had several supervisory and managerial positions and had also been responsible for buying supplies. At Johnsons, the pottery works where Taylor worked for thirty-two years, he was responsible for a period for the decorating shops where the pottery was gilded and lithographed. He consequently not only learnt shorthand and French at evening school but also chemistry and pottery.<sup>102</sup> Taylor's example suggests that for those clerks in the manufacturing sector, which had a significant presence in London, who aspired for promotion to a managerial or commercial traveller position, technical education was as important as commercial education. Mr John Brigg, M.P. and vice-chairman of the Technical Instruction Committee of the County Council of West Riding, for example, stated to the T.E.B.'s commission that technical classes were vital for those wishing to become commercial travellers in the woollen industry, a position to which many clerks aspired.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Borough of Southwark Archives, The Diary of Daniel McEwen, MS – 1982/117

<sup>102</sup> The British Library, Paul Thompson and Thea Vigne's Interviews on Family Life and Work Experience before 1918 QD1/FL WE/262, 'Mr. Frederick Henry Taylor'.

<sup>103</sup> 'Report', p. 23.

The question remains, however, of why commercial education was so important to clerks? Julie Stevenson's explanation for the preponderance of clerks at Regent Street Polytechnic being due to their higher earnings cannot be accepted. Clerks at the Polytechnic were young and would therefore have been on low incomes. With their incremental salary structures it was not until their late twenties that male clerks began to pull ahead of artisans, for example, who they outnumbered heavily. One occupational advantage that clerks may have had over skilled workers and the working class in general was that they worked shorter hours, finished work earlier and had steadier jobs which would enable them to plan and carry out a course of education. This certainly may have been a factor.

The above, however, does not adequately help us understand fully why clerks themselves were so wedded to the idea of continuing education after taking up work. One important factor here, in line with structural explanations for the emergence of commercial education at the beginning of the chapter, was that it was felt to have concrete effects in improving one's chances of promotion. Further occupational education did make sense in the long term. Clerks tended to semi-specialise in office duties. They would become ledger clerks, bookkeepers, or correspondence clerks. Promotion in many cases meant further specialisation. Learning shorthand or French enhanced a clerk's chance of promotion by equipping him or her with skills that would give comparative advantage when situations in the workplace became vacant. There is certainly evidence of this professional strategic outlook in the many advice books that were written for clerical workers. Haslehurst Greaves, for example, advised the correspondence clerk to learn at least one foreign language to gain promotion.<sup>104</sup> The

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<sup>104</sup> Haslehurst Greaves, *The Commercial Clerk and His Success*, p. 38.



bookkeeper was urged to learn statistics and all the most up-to-date methods for similar purposes.<sup>105</sup> John B. Carrington argued that, 'Every clerk, who is prepared to devote the necessary amount of time to the work, should be provided with means by which he could prove his capacity for more important duties than those in which he is at present engaged.'<sup>106</sup> Evidence from the T.E.B.'s Report clearly showed that the main reason why clerical workers attended evening courses was to better their chance of promotion. As G. Armitage Smith from the Birkbeck Institution wrote when discussing the feasibility of introducing new commercial subjects, 'As a rule young men are induced to make a special study of a subject when they see some monetary advantage will arise from it'.<sup>107</sup>

To talk, however, merely about financial gain would be to put too prosaic a light on the topic. Commercial education as a means of bettering oneself lay at the heart of the clerical worker's world view because it was the reification of one of his most sacred doctrines - the belief in self-improvement. The bettering of the individual through his own endeavour was at the epicentre of the conceptual framework of the clerk and the larger lower-middle class to which he belonged. It was an ethos which was preached from the pulpit, broadcast from books, newspapers and magazines, seen in the weekly potted biographies of 'successful men' who shone like beacons from this literature, and propagated by organisations such as the Y.M.C.A. The fact that many clerks, or their parents, had managed to climb socially out of the working classes made its basic tenets seem even more pertinent. In taking evening courses clerical workers were being more than simply mercenary, they were conforming to a social type.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid. pp. 50-1.

<sup>106</sup> John B. Carrington, The Junior Corporation Clerk, (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1911), p. 128.

<sup>107</sup> Report, p. 74.

Finally, commercial and further education for many clerks was never simply a question of classrooms and learning. Many people who take evening courses do so for the social as much as educational amenities that this offers them. In addition to the social contact which the lessons provided, many of these educational institutions had social and sporting sides as was the case at Regent Street Polytechnic. At Merton Hall near Wimbledon, for example, it boasted a 27 acre sports ground and pavilion with the largest athletics club in the kingdom.<sup>108</sup> At its site in Regents Street it had one of the grandest indoor swimming pools in central London with heated baths and later showers. In addition, it had at this site a gymnasium, a theatre (later part converted into a cinema), dining facilities, social rooms and its own magazine. In 1890 it had 27 clubs and societies which ranged from a boxing club, to a Polytechnic Parliament to various volunteer companies.<sup>109</sup> The Poly also had a strong religious dimension with prayer meetings, bible readings and talks on religious topics being an important part of its life. Finally it was also a major organiser of holidays for its members to both Britain and abroad, and can be seen as one of the principal harbingers in the U.K. of the cheap package holiday.<sup>110</sup> The spin off of its travel side, Lunn Poly, still exists today as a major national travel agent.

For the young clerical worker, barred from the public house and music hall by social prejudice, often living in restrictive lodgings, and unable to marry until he could afford to provide a home, such institutions must have appeared very appealing, particularly given the opportunities it offered them to meet the opposite sex! On Saturday, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1905, for example, George Rose walked to Langham Place and decided to join Regent Street Polytechnic's Art School. The rest of Rose's subsequent

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<sup>108</sup> University of Westminster Archives, Regents Street Polytechnic Prospectus, 1902-3, p. 35.

<sup>109</sup> The Polytechnic Magazine, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1890, p. 16.

<sup>110</sup> See Ibid, May, 1910 which included, 'The Polytechnic Holiday Supplement'.

day by day careful diary entries were dominated by the institution, the education it offered him, the social amenities he derived from it, such as the concerts held at the Queen's Hall, and the people he met there. The Polytechnic for this period became a part of Rose's life, identity and in many respects his hopes and dreams for the future.<sup>111</sup>

## Conclusions

By the time the Education Officer of the London County Council had come to compile Eight Years of Technical Education the capital had developed a system of commercial education which was comprehensive in its scope, and served the needs of London and Londoners. Commercial education in 1912 spanned all levels, from the secondary to the post-graduate. A set of institutions had been established where the subjects that comprised this body of practical knowledge could be learned. A syllabus, a body of literature, and a system of examinations had been created. An acceptance by the business community of its worth had been achieved. Equally as crucial, it had received the support of London's clerical workers who attended it in their tens of thousands. The need for such a system of education and training which was expressed at the beginning of this chapter had been largely met.<sup>112</sup>

Sean Glynn in his essay on the establishment of higher education in London has argued that the subject should be seen in the context of a city made up of a large upwardly mobile working class which blended at imperceptible points into a newly

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<sup>111</sup> Essex Records Office, The Diaries of George Rose, D/DU418/1

<sup>112</sup> See Webb, p. 97.

emergent lower-middle class.<sup>113</sup> It was also one where, ‘burgeoning commerce, retailing, finance and services created growing employment opportunities. As did the growth in land transport, navigation and the Port of London’.<sup>114</sup> It was these groups, high with aspirations for a better life, egged on by ideas of self-improvement, that the growing polytechnics, technical institutes, evening colleges, and other educational establishments chiefly catered to. Foremost amongst these were clerical workers. Clerks attended these institutes because they knew that in the context of a growing economy which offered more and more opportunities, they provided skills which could result in promotion, more money and more security. On January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1902, for example, George Rose’s employer, much to the consternation of the diarist, told his father that his son and his colleagues could be getting £50 a year more if they knew shorthand. He wondered why they were not able to see this for themselves.<sup>115</sup> Under such circumstances Pitman’s Metropolitan School was right, learning really was earning, and not, as has been argued, some last ditch desperate attempt to stave off social collapse.

Finally the rise in commercial education and higher education in general in London can be seen as a forerunner to what Peter F. Drucker has called the rise of a knowledge economy., i.e. one where knowledge rather than land, labour or capital becomes the primary resource.<sup>116</sup> Clearly it would be premature to say that London and Britain’s economy was based on knowledge. It was not. It would not be, however, wrong to say that what one knew rather than what one simply could do was becoming

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<sup>113</sup> Glynn, p. 13.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> The Diaries of George Rose, January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1902.

<sup>116</sup> See Drucker, Post-Capitalist Society, Chapter 1.

of increasing importance. This point was underlined by the veteran technical education campaigner Lord Lyon Playfair in 1895,

Formerly the possession of iron, the source of strength, and of coal, the source of power, gave to England its character as an industrial nation. But gradually iron and coal were found as cheap in other countries, or they could be acquired as cheaply by other nations through improvements in means of transport by sea and land. Industrial competition then becomes converted into a competition of intellect. The nation which becomes the most educated nation will become the greatest nation – if not today, certainly tomorrow.<sup>117</sup>

As self-styled ‘brain workers’ this point had deep implications for clerical workers. More education could only result in an improvement in their status. This explains why the establishment of commercial education as a recognised academic discipline, crowned by its inclusion in the syllabus of London University in 1900, was of such importance to clerks and all those involved in the business community. By association, its establishment as a recognised discipline gave respect to the entire profession. As Sidney Webb wrote, ‘Such university recognition is essential in our view both to give *status* [his italics] to the higher branches of commercial education and to increase their attractiveness to students of the highest mental capacity. But it is also of the utmost importance to commercial education itself, as tending to ensure a high intellectual standard, and to counteract a tendency to an unduly utilitarianism’.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> The Polytechnic Magazine, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1895, p. 3.

<sup>118</sup> Sidney Webb, p. 132.

Michel Foucault, based on the diktats of Nietzsche, argued that in a modern society knowledge is power. Such 'knowledge', however, was seen as something that was produced, validated and reproduced by society itself. The chief engine for this process was and is modern science and academic institutions. In his work The Birth of the Clinic, for example, Foucault showed that in seventeenth and eighteenth century France, medicine was institutionalised in hospitals, turned into a discipline and monopolised by a select group of men.<sup>119</sup> Something similar to this process was taking place in the business world towards the end of the nineteenth century. The T.E.B.'s report on commercial education, for example, noted when discussing instruction at university level that, '...The organisation of those studies should be framed under the idea that commercial and industrial life rest upon a complex series of laws, which it is the duty of the trained student to investigate'. As part of its process of professionalisation, commerce, business, finance, administration, etc., like medicine in seventeenth and eighteenth century France, were becoming codified into blocs of knowledge, dispersed and reproduced by the institutions which provided commercial education and validated by the various examining bodies that have been outlined in this chapter. As such, commercial education began to act as a gatekeeper into the business world. It both included and excluded. At such a basic, but also fundamental level, it can clearly be seen why commercial education was of such importance to clerical workers and why it came to have such an important hold on them.

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<sup>119</sup> Michel Foucault, The Birth of the Clinic, (London: Tavistock Publications, 1973)

## Chapter VIII

### Clerical Trade Unions, Associations and Collective Organisations

Of all subjects relating to clerical workers, no area has attracted more historical attention than clerical trade unions. All of the principal organisations, the Railway Clerks Association (RCA), the National Union of Clerks (NUC), the National and Local Government Officers Association (NALGO), the postal unions and the civil service associations have received comprehensive historical coverage.<sup>1</sup> These studies have tended to be descriptive in their scope, mapping the growth of these various unions and charting their activities and achievements rather than providing much in the way of analysis. It is perhaps ironic that so much research has gone into an area where there is a relatively broad consensus that clerks had little interest.

Both David Lockwood and Gregory Anderson have approached the subject in their studies on clerical workers.<sup>2</sup> Both noted that clerical unionisation was starkly uneven before the First World War. While there was strong growth amongst railway clerks, post office clerical and manipulative workers, local government officers and civil servants, many clerical workers, particularly in the commercial and financial sectors, were almost untouched by it. It is this phenomenon which has interested

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<sup>1</sup> For the RCA see Malcolm Wallace, Single or Return, The History of the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association, (London: Transport Salaried Staffs' Association, 1996). For the NUC see F. Hughes, By Hand and Brain. The Story of the Clerical and Administrative Workers (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1953). For the various civil service associations and postal unions see B.V. Humphreys, Clerical Unions in the Civil Service, (London: Blackwell and Mott, 1958). For NALGO see Alec Spoor, White Collar Union 60 Years of NALGO, (London: Heinemann, 1967)

<sup>2</sup> See Gregory Anderson, Victorian Clerks, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), and David Lockwood, The Black Coated Worker, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1958).

commentators most. The fact that growth was sectional suggests that structural factors may have been chief determinants in deciding whether unionisation took place amongst clerks or not. Both Lockwood and Anderson have argued that unionisation was dependent on capital concentration and bureaucratisation. Where offices became large, where relations between owners, management and employees became governed by impersonal regulations and codes of procedure rather than by personal relations, unions were able to flourish.<sup>3</sup> Such an explanation, however, while valid, is too simplistic and requires deeper analysis. In addition, both Lockwood and Anderson have tended to take a very one-dimensional approach to clerical unions, and consequently overlooked the diversity of their structures and organisation. At the same time, little has been said about the aims and strategies of these unions, in what ways they were similar to manual unions and how they were different.

This chapter will attempt to fill these gaps in the research on clerical unions. It will begin by outlining the different varieties of clerical organisations, of which trade unions were in fact only one manifestation. Following this it will ask to what extent these organisations reflected the 'new unionism' which was said to have been a phenomenon of this period? It will then detail the demands of clerical trade unions and associations, and examine the strategies these organisations selected to realise their goals. Following this, it will examine the question of whether there was any inherent contradiction between collective action and clerical workers, and will end by re-examining the question of why some unions succeeded and others failed.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 110.



Overall the chapter will argue that many clerical workers were in fact organised in this period, and that the distinction between trade union organisations and associations should not be overstated. There were differing degrees of collective action, with some far less radical than others. Such action was often used by clerks to reinforce individualist, traditional demands such as the rule of merit and self-help.

In addition, trade unionism appealed to a significant number of clerks with progressive ideas in London, providing entry for them into the political life of the capital. In relation to the unions themselves, it will be argued that while these organisations reflected the general characteristics of the 'new unionism' of the period, clerical unions differed in some respects from other groups. One chief difference was their rejection of the strike weapon and their exclusive adoption of parliamentary pressure and propaganda. It is here that the success of clerical trade unions lay. While the extent of bureaucratisation and standardisation was certainly a *sine qua non* for collective action and development, it was this combined with their ease of access to parliament and other state agencies that determined their success. In addition, it will be argued that low income was certainly a factor determining unionisation amongst clerical workers despite Anderson's claims to the contrary.

### **Clerical Organisation – Its Extent and Variety**

By 1914 a significant number of clerks had become organised. The RCA for example had a membership of almost 30,000 members in 1914, and the NUC 12,500.<sup>4</sup> In 1912, the National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks had

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<sup>4</sup> See Malcolm Wallace, Single or Return?, p. 103, and The Clerk, May, 1914, p. 83.

almost 65,000 members.<sup>5</sup> In addition, most civil servants and post offices workers belonged to an organisation, chief amongst which were the Assistant Clerks Association (ACA), the Second Division Clerks Association, the Inland Revenue Staff Federation, the Postal Clerks Association and the Postal Telegraph Clerks Association.<sup>6</sup> While a significant minority of clerks were unionised before 1914, a very large number, both in London and across the nation, were not.

Such a picture, however, is too simplistic, and does not illustrate the complexity of clerical organisations. It fails to do so for two reasons. Firstly, clerks belonged to a plethora of professional and work organisations, some of which functioned in ways similar to trade unions. Secondly, there were several types of unions, all of which varied in the intensity of their collective action. Some of these were more radical than others. Some were similar to professional associations which have not been branded by previous commentators as unions. Consequently, it can be argued that clerical organisation was more comprehensive than has been previously assumed. In addition, one cannot simply dismiss professional associations and other clerical organisations as irrelevant.<sup>7</sup> These two areas will be looked at in turn.

The extent and range of clerical organisations can be seen in the Booth Collection in the archives of the London School of Economics.<sup>8</sup> This collection contains in it pamphlets, rule books and other material of clerical organisations in London around 1900. This material was used by Booth for his seminal social and economic survey of

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<sup>5</sup> See Sidney and Beatrice Webb, The History of Trade Unionism, (London: Longmans & Co., 1920), p. 505.

<sup>6</sup> See B.V. Humphreys, Clerical Unions in the Civil Service, in particular pp. 231-232.

<sup>7</sup> See F.D. Klingender, The Condition of Clerical Labour in Britain, (London: Martin Lawrence, 1935), p. viii.

<sup>8</sup> British Library of Political and Economic Science Archives Division BOOTH F2/3/1-10, 'Booklets Collected as a Result of Charles Booth Survey of Life and Labour in London, 1886-1903'

the capital, London Life and Labour, and by the Webbs in their work on trade unions. The collection contains material from a number of organisations which include unions such as the NUC and RCA, and in addition from non-union organisations such as the London Clerks Association, a registered friendly society, the Association of Foremen and Clerks of the Docks, Wharves and Warehouses of London, and even the Ibis Society, the sports and social club of Holborn Bars, the headquarters of the Prudential Life Assurance Company. The inclusion of such material in one collection suggests that for Booth such diverse groups were part of a common phenomenon, the collective organisations of clerical workers whose aim was to improve, in different ways, the professional lives of their members.

Alongside these groups, were a large number of other non-union clerical organisations in London from a wide range of sectors. These included the London County Council Staff Association, the Staff Association of the London Metropolitan Water Board, The Institute of Bankers, and the Law Clerks Association.<sup>9</sup> While these bodies were not registered as official trade unions they nevertheless collectively represented their individual members in order to improve their professional positions. When in 1909, for example, the London County Council imposed a £200 barrier on its officials, the L.C.C. Staff Association was created, and was able by lobbying members of the Council, organising petitions, collectively representing its members before management, to raise the £200 barrier by £45.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the Institute of Bankers, an

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<sup>9</sup> See London Metropolitan Archives, Andrew, C.D. and G.C. Burge, Progress Report, 1909-1959. The First Fifty Years in the History of the L.C.C. Staff Association, (London: Privately Published, 1959); Edwin Green, Debtors to their Profession. A History of the Institute of Bankers 1879-1979, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1979); W.S. Chevalier, London's Water Supply, 1903-53. A Review of the Work of the Metropolitan Water Board, (London: Staple Press Ltd, 1953), p. 334. For a report on a proposed merger between the National Union of Clerks and the Law Clerks Association see The Clerk, February, 1908, p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> See Andrew and Burge, Progress Report, 1909-1959, Chapter I.

organisation that was created as a result of agitation from bankers clerks, created a series of professional banking examinations which aimed at improving the status of those working in the banking industry. In addition, the Institute ran and financed a Sanatorium for those suffering from Tuberculosis and established a widows and orphans fund. Via the Institution, bank clerks were thus able to collectively wring important concessions from their employers which would have been impossible if attempted individually.<sup>11</sup> This is not to argue that the Institute of Bankers was a trade union, a claim which would probably have turned its founders in their graves, but to emphasise that there were other mediums of clerical professional collective action which did not necessitate having to taking the path of trade unionism.

In addition, one should not lump all clerical unions into one uniform organisation which had common characteristics and goals. There was wide variety within these organisations. Whether an organisation was registered as a union or not, whether it was affiliated to the Trades Union Congress and/or the Labour Party, and whether it endorsed strike action were all important factors in a body's make-up. The National Union of Clerks by 1914, for example, had all of these characteristics, the Railway Clerks Association was affiliated to the TUC and Labour Party, though only in 1910 in relation to the latter and not without considerable acrimony within the movement<sup>12</sup>, but insisted on non-militant action to achieve its goals. Clerical Associations within the Civil Service were neither registered as unions nor had links to the Labour Party. Yet even here the radical Assistant Clerks Association affiliated to Labour in 1916. In contrast the Post Office Unions were registered and active supporters of the TUC and Labour Party. Similarly, some of these unions, such as the NUC, offered members a

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<sup>11</sup> Green, Debtors to their Profession, Chapters III & IV.

<sup>12</sup> See Malcom Wallace, Single or Return, pp. 39-43.

full range of social benefits and services such as pensions, unemployment benefits and assistance with illness, some, such as the RCA offered limited benefits, and others offered none at all.

It is thus clear that the dichotomy between unionised and non-unionised, or organised and non-organised clerks is wrong. Instead it would be more accurate to speak in terms of a spectrum of organisation and militancy. On this basis, at one extreme would be the National Union of Clerks, unionised, politically radical and militant and at the other end were groups such as The Institute of Bankers. Such a system of analysis would incorporate the key Weberian concept of 'Party', the idea that along with one's class position and social status, the groups to which a person belongs, particularly those that are specifically concerned with influencing policies and making decisions in the interests of their members, are key determiners in an individual's social position.<sup>13</sup> The advantage of this would be that it would include a broader range of London's clerical workers than has been previously permissible.

### **Clerical Unions and 'New Unionism'**

The rise in collective action amongst clerks from the 1890s was part of a wider growth in trade unionism across Britain in this period. Trade Union membership in Britain and Ireland grew from one and a half million members in 1890 to 4,145,000 in 1914.<sup>14</sup> Much of this has been attributed to the rise of 'New Unionism'. The term,

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<sup>13</sup> See H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, (London: Routledge, 1997) pp. 194-5.

<sup>14</sup> Anderson, Victorian Clerks, p. 16., Keith Laybourn, A History of British Trade Unionism c. 1770-1990, (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1992), p. 76.

most renowned from its usage by the Webbs in their history of British Trade Unions in 1920, denoted, as its name suggests, a change in the nature of collective action. It has been argued that it was a shift in the nature of trade unions which was responsible for their numerical growth after 1890.<sup>15</sup>

The Webbs saw the chief characteristics of 'New Unionism' as an inclusion in the ranks of organised labour of large groups of workers who had traditionally remained outside of the pale of Trade Unionism. These covered, in particular, semi-skilled and unskilled workers. Other characteristics included a new assertiveness on the part of trade unionism. This was reflected, for example, in demands for a minimum wage, an eight-hour working day and a willingness to engage in the political sphere, both on a local and national level, which saw eventual fruition in the establishment of the Labour Party. Finally, the growth of national, general unions which covered all grades and, in some cases, types of labour was seen as another characteristic. This was typified in the establishment of unions such as the Transport and General Workers and the General and Municipal Workers Unions. In sum, 'New Unionism' was said to be inclusive rather than exclusive, pro-active rather than reactive, and national rather than local. While the concept has undergone revision by historians its core ideas, have for all intents and purposes, remained relatively unscathed.<sup>16</sup>

In the confines of the above definition, the new 'black-coated' unions were prime examples of this new trend in collective action. Clerks like dockers, gasworkers and municipal employees were workers who had previously shown no real history of

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<sup>15</sup> See Sidney and Beatrice Webb, The History of Trade Unionism, 1660-19120, Chapter VII, and Laybourn, A History of British Trade Unionism, Chapter III.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

collective action began, in varying degrees, to unionise after 1890.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, many clerical unions were as assertive in their demands for a minimum wage, shorter working hours and better working conditions as their manual counterparts.<sup>18</sup> They were also equally prepared to use political means, particularly through lobbying, as a means of realising their aims.

Where clerical unions differed from other manual unions was in their demands and strategies. Organised clerical workers, while wanting more money and having to work fewer hours to obtain this, also wanted other things such as improved career opportunities. They also rejected the strike weapon and tended to put more emphasis on two other weapons; publicity and politics. Both these areas will be examined in turn.

### **The Demands of Clerical Unions**

The demands of clerical unions concentrated on ameliorating working conditions. Improvements of salaries were foremost amongst their demands. The National Union of Clerks, for example, stipulated a minimum wage at 21 of 35 shillings a week.<sup>19</sup> Since clerical incomes were gradual and incremental, much energy was also devoted to standardising and improving pay scales and maxima. The R.C.A., for example, tirelessly petitioned railway companies via memorials with demands for pay increases

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<sup>17</sup> *The Clerk*, January, 1908, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> See British Library of Political and Economic Science WIC/B/26, 'Rules of the National Union of Clerks, 1894'.

<sup>19</sup> See the A.C.A. magazine *Red Tape*, March, 1912, p. 10. See also British Library of Political and Economic Science Coll. Misc. 6/8, 'National Union of Clerks London Central Branch Minute Book, 21<sup>st</sup>. November, 1912'.

and the implementation of new salary scales.<sup>20</sup> Such action, for example, was mirrored by the Association of Assistant Clerks before and during the MacDonnell Commission, established in 1912 to enquire into recruitment and salaries in the Civil Service.<sup>21</sup>

Demands for pay increases *per se*, however, only reveal part of the activities of the clerical unions. Clerical associations fully appreciated the fact that office work required a fragmented hierarchical structure with disparate levels of income. Improving incomes for its members, consequently, meant not only attempting to improve overall pay, but also, over the course of their careers, facilitating access to these more prestigious and highly paid positions. In this respect, demands such as the institutionalisation of systems of recruitment and promotion based on merit rather than patronage, the establishment of modern training systems, and a system of professional examinations were all advocated to varying degrees by these organisations. Unions clearly understood that without the realisation of these demands, general pay increases would be meaningless.

### **Merit versus Patronage**

Clerical trade unions were *both* defensive and aggressive. As has been argued in the third chapter of this study, clerical work underwent for many a transformation in the second half of the nineteenth century. Within this overall context, methods of recruitment and promotion gradually changed (see chapters six and seven). Patronage

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<sup>20</sup> For examples of memorials sent to the Great Western Railway see National Archives RAIL 258/404, 'Great Western Railway Secretarial Papers: salaried staff, increase in salaries, Sunday pay, grant of concessions, memorials, extract from minute papers, etc., 1904-22'

<sup>21</sup> See Fifty-Sixth Report of the Royal Commission on the Civil Service; 1912-13 Cd. 6332, Vol.VX.



systems became replaced by merit. What one knew and was capable of doing in many spheres of clerical work gradually began to take the place of who one knew and how much wealth one had. Merit opened doors to thousands of young men and women who under the older system would have been prescribed to more menial positions as a result of their parents' social strata. It became, in many respects, the leading ideology of the newly emerging lower-middle class, a group rich in ambition but relatively poor in financial resources. Clerical unions consequently strongly pushed the ideology of meritocracy and fiercely resisted any challenge to its onward march.

A good example of this was the campaign by the Assistant Clerks Association against what they saw as the reintroduction of patronage in the Civil Service. The foundations of meritocracy in the office can be seen as being laid by the report of Sir Stafford Northcote and Sir Charles Trevelyan (1853), prepared for Gladstone, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, outlining recommendations for the reform of the Civil Service. Their two proposals, recruitment by competitive examination and the establishment of a central board to oversee such examinations became the defining features of the modern Service.<sup>22</sup> While recruitment by competition became gradually established throughout all the government departments, this system was felt to be challenged at the turn of the twentieth century by the increasing use of direct recruitment. This was particularly so in the new Labour Exchange Centres and National Insurance Offices. While the government argued that these new positions needed men with experience and practical knowledge who could only be properly selected by limited competition

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<sup>22</sup> Red Tape, October, 1911, p. 4.

and/or interview, the civil service clerical associations only saw in this a covert attempt to re-introduce patronage.<sup>23</sup>

The result of such changes was a sustained campaign by the A.S.A. (as well as the Second Division Clerks Association), which from the evidence of their monthly journal, Red Tape, appears to have absorbed much of their time and energy. It was rewarded by the establishment of the MacDonnell Commission in 1912. Memoranda were sent to Members of Parliament, Ministers were questioned in Parliament by supporters of the associations, a memorial was sent to the Prime Minister protesting the issue, and article after article was written on the subject.<sup>24</sup>

The A.C.A.'s attack on patronage did not simply stop at protest against the increasing failure to use the competitive examination for government appointments, but evolved into an all-out attack on the entire constitution of the Civil Service itself. The Service by 1910 had evolved into a highly complex structure. Following the recommendations of the Playfair Commission, 1874-5, two grades of civil servants had been created, the Lower Division (later called the Second Division) who were responsible for clerical work, and the First Division who were responsible for administrative work. Thirty years later these grades were joined by an Intermediate Class, located somewhere between the other two classes, an Assistant Clerk grade, who carried out more menial clerical work, and female clerks and boy clerks who were responsible for mechanical office work such as copying and filing.<sup>25</sup> Each grade had their own entrance examination which for many locked them into one particular grade for their entire

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<sup>23</sup> See Fifty Sixth Report of the Royal Commission of the Civil Service; 1912-13 Cd. 6332, Vol. XV., particularly the evidence of Mr Stanley M. Leathers, C.B., First Civil Service Commissioner.

<sup>24</sup> See Red Tape, October 1911, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Fourth Report of the Royal Commission on the Civil Service; 1914 Cd 7338 Vol. XVI., pp. 7-22.

career. This was condemned by the A.C.A. as being socially divisive, biased towards the rich who were able to dominate the higher clerical positions due to their superior education, completely antithetical to the efficiency of the Service and opposed to the principle of merit. As the Association argued in 1912, the current Civil Service competitive examinations consisted of the ‘...judicious use of a system of Patronage, and the manipulation of the examination scheme in such a way as to secure that ability shall only have chances of success when it has received a particular type of education at a particular type of school.’<sup>26</sup>

The A.C.A. ultimately failed in their efforts to establish a common entrance examination for the Civil Service. The MacDonnell Report recommended a simplification of the clerical grades, but insisted on the maintenance of the distinction between Administrative and Clerical work, and distinctions within the latter. Despite this, however, the Commission reconfirmed its overall commitment and support to the competitive system and selection based on merit.<sup>27</sup> The struggle by the A.C.A. and other civil service associations for the cause and protection of merit was indicative of the deep commitment that clerical workers had towards this ideology. It was one which was fully articulated by their associations, and one which reverberated loudly among the other white-collar unions.

### **Training and Professional Examinations**

Whilst the growing acceptance of merit within businesses and government offices was welcomed by clerical trade unions, the large increase in the number of individuals

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<sup>26</sup> Red Tape., March, 1912, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> See Fourth Report of the Royal Commission on the Civil Service, pp. 27-39. See Red Tape, April, 1914, for the response of the A.C.A. to the Report.

entering the clerical profession was not. Clerical unions believed that an uncontrolled influx of new recruits into offices, due to an extension of education, had resulted in the lowering of the income and status of the average clerical worker. As the President of the Railway Clerks Association argued in a speech to the Seventeenth Annual Conference of the union in Edinburgh, 1914, '...The economic position of clerks as a class has been encroached upon very seriously indeed since the supply of clerical labour was increased to an almost unlimited extent by the institution of free education in this country...'.<sup>28</sup> The response of the unions to this was twofold. On the one hand, they argued that better opportunities in the way of education and training should be furnished to clerks to make them more efficient and thus better remunerated. On the other, they argued for a restriction of the supply of clerical workers by the introduction of a system of professional examinations.

The demand for better education and training chimed with the general clerical commitment to self-improvement. Vocational education took centre stage in the policies and agendas of many white-collar trade unions. The second rule, for example, of the National Union of Clerks (c. 1894) was, 'To provide (when funds permit) educational facilities for members and for the issue of certificates of clerical efficiency.'<sup>29</sup> Similarly, at the annual conference of the Railway Clerks Association in 1894 in London, three key subjects were discussed by delegates: Labour Representation, Nationalisation and Technical Education. Indeed, it was argued by The Railway Clerk that the latter should be first among their objectives.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> London School of Economics Library, (Pamphlet) HD6 B15, Progress, Combination and Agreement Amongst Clerks, 1914, p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. WIC/B/26, 'Rules of the National Union of Clerks, 1894'.

<sup>30</sup> The Railway Clerk, June, 1904, p. 59.

While clerical unions attempted to improve their members education collectively through organised lectures, educational groups and articles in their publications<sup>31</sup>, some unions went further in arguing that it was the responsibility of the companies, rather than their workers, to educate and train their staff. This argument was foremost in the Railway Clerks Association where a tradition of company training had already been well established in the railway industry. One of the chief arguments of the R.C.A. was that while the companies were prepared to invest money in educating other grades such as drivers, engineers and signal men, little had been done for the clerks. Such education was needed to ensure that clerks had an equal opportunity for promotion and because many of the managers of the companies were recruited from the clerical grades of the railway companies.<sup>32</sup> It was an area where the union to some extent gained concrete results. Railway Clerks were able to push for the establishment of classes provided by the firms in many railway companies, including, for example, the formation of classes on the Metropolitan Railway in 1911 at the Neasden works to study the principles of electric train working and other railway subjects.<sup>33</sup>

The argument for more education and training was complemented by the demands of the unions for the establishment of professional examinations. Such demands were voiced, to varying degrees, by virtually all the clerical associations, both unions and non-unions alike. Via such examinations it was hoped that the flow of recruits into clerical positions could be stemmed, overall recruitment controlled, and subsequently wages improved. In addition, such examinations were seen as a way of diminishing nepotism and enhancing promotion by merit. Finally, it was hoped that such

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<sup>31</sup> See 'National Union of Clerks London Central Branch, Minute Book, 1<sup>st</sup> May 1911 to 30<sup>th</sup> June, 1914'. See also The Railway Clerk, 1904, p. 48.

<sup>32</sup> See for example, The Railway Clerk, August, 1906, p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, October, 1906, p. 10.

examinations would professionalise clerical work and thus raise its status. In this respect, clerical unions and associations hardly differed, at least in terms of their goals, from other contemporary professional organisations such as the Chartered Institute of Accountants or the National Union of Teachers.

While grandiose plans such as those of the N.U.C. for a comprehensive system of clerical examinations for all grades and sectors ultimately failed, other groups with more moderate schemes were more successful.<sup>34</sup> The Institute of Bankers' qualifications became gradually more widespread and accepted.<sup>35</sup> The N.A.L.G.O. introduced its own professional examinations in 1905, which soon became popular across the country.<sup>36</sup> The railway companies too extended their support for technical and commercial education for their clerical workers. Several companies even introduced management training programmes in the years running up to the First World War, with the co-operation of educational institutes such as the L.S.E.<sup>37</sup> Such programmes provided railway clerks with a more structured path into management positions, opening for some the possibility of a career. While such programmes may not have been the sole result of union pressure, they are evidence of important structural shifts in the clerical labour market. It was these shifts which clerical unions and associations encouraged and strove for, and which, in addition to demands for pay increases and better conditions, represented one of the major goals of these organisations.

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<sup>34</sup> See *The Clerk*, March, 1908, p. 37.

<sup>35</sup> See Edwin Green, *Debtors to their Profession*, Chapter IV.

<sup>36</sup> See John B. Carrington, *The Junior Corporation Clerk*, (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons Ltd., 1910), pp. 127-8. See also *The London County Council Staff Gazette*, June, 1914, pp. 138-9.

<sup>37</sup> See National Archives RAIL 258/400, 'Great Western Railway, Clerical Staff: recruiting, examination of, 1877-1914'.

## Strategies of Clerical Unions and Associations

How did clerical unions operate? What strategies did they develop in which to try and realise their goals? The strike or direct action was certainly not one of them. An article in The Clerk, for example, commented in 1908 that, '...Strikes are barbarous, should already be obsolete, are particularly unsuitable for clerks, and the handle of the weapon cuts worse than the blade. We can therefore dismiss it.'<sup>38</sup> Evidence of the limited industrial action that clerks took against their employers in this period confirms this view. A refusal to perform overtime by 282 clerks at the Post Office Savings Bank in January, 1891, led to a lock-out by management who demanded written apologies from all clerks concerned. Within a week all clerks were back at their desks, having complied with the wishes of management.<sup>39</sup> Similarly strikes by the N.U.C., despite the above protestation, at the Port of London authority 1912-13, and at Rees Roturbo Co. Ltd. at Wolverhampton in 1914 both ended in complete failure.<sup>40</sup> The latter, indeed, descended almost into farce, with two of the striking clerks having a summons taken out against them by a blackleg, ex-commercial traveller from Walsall, for 'persistently following him from place to place.'<sup>41</sup>

Instead of resorting to strike action, clerical unions turned to two other areas of action. The first of these was publicity. By the dissemination of information directly aimed at

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<sup>38</sup> The Clerk, August, 1908, p. 105.

<sup>39</sup> See The Office, January 10<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>, 1891. See also B.V. Humphreys, Clerical Unions in the Civil Service, pp. 43-5, and Samuel Cohn, The Process of Occupational Sex-Typing. The Feminization of Clerical Labor in Great Britain, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), p. 148 & pp. 155-6.

<sup>40</sup> See The Clerk, June, 1912, p. 88 and April, 1914, pp. 61-3.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., August, 1908, p. 105.

their grievances, these organisations hoped to win over public support and also convince fellow-colleagues and employers of the legitimacy of their claims. The second was politics. In many respects, clerical unions and associations were lobby groups. They regularly put pressure on and formed alliances with individual M.P.s, and later on the Labour Party, to push their demands onto centre stage in the political arena. Both these strategies were used to varying degrees by all the white-collar organisations of this period, and can be said to be defining features of these bodies.

### **The Use of Publicity**

The article in The Clerk which rejected strike action, advocated the use of N.U.C. employment bureaus and the demand for a national minimum wage as two alternatives. In addition it argued, ‘...There remains yet another weapon, and that, perhaps, the strongest, if properly used – public opinion. This we must create.’<sup>42</sup> Rather than directly force issues, clerical unions attempted to win hearts and minds. This was felt to be doubly important as many unions argued they laboured under the disadvantage of being widely stereotyped by a relatively unsympathetic public. ‘At present’, argued The Clerk, ‘public opinion re clerks is that they will let themselves be trampled upon. Stiff collar, cuffs, and a penny in his pocket is the mental picture conjured up in many minds at present when ‘clerk’ is mentioned. The phrase ‘Pound a week Clerks’ is one of contempt, and we shall deserve the contempt until we have killed the phrase’.<sup>43</sup> It was also argued that many believed clerks to be in well paid, secure and undemanding jobs where promotion was guaranteed. The opening edition of Red Tape in October, 1911, for example, spoke of the Civil Servant of popular

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.



mythology who was dignified, leisurely, well paid, worked in luxurious surroundings, and performed work which while light in amount, was profound in content. This was said to be a far cry from the working lives of many of the low-paid, routine clerks of the Service.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, an article in The Railway Clerk, in 1911 entitled, 'Facts and Fiction re Railway Clerks' Salaries' lambasted the popular press for exaggerating the salaries and opportunities open to railway clerks.<sup>45</sup>

The principal propaganda weapon which the unions put to work was the written word. Unions often used national and local newspapers to broadcast their message to a wider audience. The Clerk, for example, wrote in 1910 that one result of a deputation of the Union in the previous year to the then Prime Minister Asquith, and his Chancellor, Lloyd George, was a conversion of the Daily Express to the N.U.C.'s cause.<sup>46</sup> In the same year the Second Division Clerks Association compiled a memorandum against patronage appointments in the Civil Service. The text was issued to Members of Parliament *and* sent to the Press.<sup>47</sup> In addition, all the major unions had journals in which their grievances were clearly and repeatedly stated. These papers were intended equally for non-union members who these organisations wanted to attract as well as those who had already joined. Union policy and arguments were disseminated in articles, short essays and letters. Fiction, usually in the form of short stories, and poems, were also used to hammer home the message of these organisations. This was brilliantly done, for example, in Red Tape, where a series of entertaining short stories, entitled 'Civil Service Sketches' depicted civil servants in harrowing positions, from out of work clerks hanging around outside pubs

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<sup>44</sup> Red Tape, October, 1911, p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> The Railway Clerk, January, 1911, pp. 4-5.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, January, 1910, p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> Red Tape, October, 1911, p. 3.

on Tottenham Court Road to tormented young husbands with expectant wives living in suburban flats in Wandsworth.<sup>48</sup> Such journals often had readerships in excess of their association's numbers showing that they were widely read by members and non-members alike, and thus assisted in spreading their message. Red Tape, the journal of the A.C.A., for example, had sales of over 5,000, despite the fact that membership of the association was just over 2,000.<sup>49</sup>

Clerical unions often collected, collated and published statistics and other facts which they used in their war of words with their employers. This was either done in pamphlet form which was distributed to the wider public and employers, or, as seen, inserted in petitions when clerical workers made direct appeals to their superiors. In relation to the former, one of the best examples of these was a publication by the R.C.A. in 1911 entitled, The Life of a Railway Clerk, Some Interesting Facts and Figures.<sup>50</sup> This thirty-two page document was a comprehensive collection of facts and figures which presented the average income of railway clerks, compared their incomes with clerical workers in other sectors, and showed that railway officials were being adversely affected by increases in the cost of living. The booklet was distributed across the country to the public, parents, and management in the railways. It was advertised in the press and even sent to schools.<sup>51</sup> One of its aims was to discourage parents from selecting careers in the railways for their offspring. For an industry which was having difficulty in finding adequate recruits, the publication must have

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<sup>48</sup> See Red Tape, March, 1913, pp. 92-3., and *Ibid.*, February, 1912, pp. 6-7.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, December, 1911, p. 11.

<sup>50</sup> Railway Clerks Association, The Life of a Railway Clerk, (London: Railway Clerks Association, 1911)

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, The R.C.A. and its Path of Progress (London: Railway Clerks Association, 1928), p. 28.

been highly effective, and certainly played a role in the pay increases that were awarded to clerks across the railway industry in 1911.<sup>52</sup>

## **The Use of Politics**

Alongside the use of media, publicity and propaganda, clerical unions used formal political channels to further their ends. The two were clearly related. If unions were able to muster public support, politicians and parliament would have to respond by assisting these organisations in realising their goals. The R.C.A. made this connection in 1906 when it observed that, 'Nothing but publicity of the shortcomings of the management, the drawing of attention to the ordinary citizens of the fearful wrongs under which the rank and file of the service lay, will bring about the desired reforms, and to this end we hope and believe we shall receive the attention of Parliament itself.'<sup>53</sup> Additionally, some demands such as the maintenance of a minimum standard of hygiene in offices or compensation for injuries incurred during working hours expressly needed parliamentary action. The inclusion of office workers in the Workmen's Compensation Act, 1906 was a case in point. The original bill which was introduced to Parliament excluded clerical workers. Intense lobbying by the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress and the newly-formed Labour Party with support from the R.C.A. and N.U.C. was successful in persuading the Home Secretary, Herbert Gladstone, to include clerks within the remit of the bill.<sup>54</sup>

Clerical unions and associations made sure that they had a coterie of M.P.'s whose support they could rely on. The opening editions of The Railway Clerk, for example,

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.. See also National Archives RAIL 258/400, 'Great Western Railway Clerical Staff, 1877-1914'.

<sup>53</sup> The Railway Clerk, January, 1906, p. 6.

<sup>54</sup> The R.C.A. and its Path of Progress, p. 14. See also The Clerk, January, 1908, p. 5.

proudly introduced Members who supported the R.C.A.'s cause to its readers by providing potted biographies of each one. These men, all back benchers, came from a variety of parties including the Conservative Party. All had interests in trade unionism. The ties between the men and the union were formalised by each of them being vice-presidents of the organisation, with Sir Fortescue Flannery, a radical/progressive, and M.P. since 1895, President of the Association.<sup>55</sup> Similar ties existed with other clerical associations including the N.U.C., Postal Unions and Civil Service Associations.<sup>56</sup> Over time, particularly within the R.C.A., the bonds between the Labour Party and the unions became stronger, and the party became the principal engine of parliamentary action. In many respects, these affiliations and formal ties simply institutionalised relations that had existed between clerical unions and politicians since the inception of these organisations.<sup>57</sup>

One M.P. who was active in white-collar unions was the future Labour Chancellor Philip Snowden. Snowden was among a group of well-wishers reported in the opening edition of The Clerk in 1908. 'I am very glad to hear that there is a move of an encouraging character among clerks in the direction of organisation.', he wrote, 'No other class stands more in need of it'.<sup>58</sup> Snowden was the principle parliamentary supporter of the A.S.A.. He regularly asked questions on its behalf in Parliament and was persistent in his support of meritocracy in the Civil Service.<sup>59</sup> His composition of a memorial outlining the problems of promotion and appointment in the Service, which received 403 signatures from M.P.s, played an important role in the

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<sup>55</sup> See The Railway Clerk, 'Portraits of our Leaders', January – July, 1904.

<sup>56</sup> See Humphreys, Clerical Unions, Chapter IV.

<sup>57</sup> See Malcolm Wallace, Single or Return, pp. 31-45.

<sup>58</sup> The Clerk, January, 1908, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> See Red Tape, October, 1911, p. 3.

appointment of the Macdonald Commission in 1912.<sup>60</sup> Snowden sat on the Commission, and used his questions to articulate the claims and grievances of the Civil Service Associations.

Such support for the establishment of parliamentary enquiries into conditions of office work was a key strategy of the clerical unions and associations. This was extremely important for civil servants, local government officers and postal clerks, since these were state employees. Such enquiries were the only legal means by which these associations could put their grievances and claims directly before the government and parliament.<sup>61</sup>

A parliamentary strategy was also central to the R.C.A.. In this period railway companies were not strictly speaking purely private concerns. They were private companies in that they were owned by private shareholders, eligible for a share of their profits. They were public, however, in that their charters were granted by parliament. If the companies wanted to make any major structural alterations such as mergers, take-overs or even altering the make-up of their pension schemes, this could only be done with prior parliamentary permission. As the railway companies expanded in the second half of the nineteenth century their public face became more pronounced. Their growing use by the public and business world, and the resultant increased dependency that came from this, made the railway industry an area of national concern. This point was fully emphasised by Sam Fay in his Presidential speech as head of the Railway Students Union at the L.S.E.,

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. pp. 3-4.

<sup>61</sup> See Ibid., January, 1912, p. 3.

...Time was when railways were looked upon as private properties run for private gain only, but I doubt if any railwayman to-day...regards railways as private in the sense that a shopkeeper's business is private. The railways are private on the financial side alone. The shareholders who have found the capital expect their dividends in the same way as holders of Consols would expect interest if the Government took over the railways and issued Consols on account of the purchase, but even on the financial side they are controlled by specific Acts of Parliament. They are public in that everybody has a right to use them upon terms not exceeding charges fixed by legislation. They are common carriers. They assume serious public responsibilities, and their acts and duties are regulated by the legislature. The work of their officers and servants is public work in precisely the same sense as is the work of officers and servants in the Post Office.<sup>62</sup>

Due to the railway's growing public prominence, the R.C.A., sometimes in conjunction with other rail unions, was able to push for and have its representatives appear as witnesses in important parliamentary inquiries into the railway industry which directly affected their interests. The two most important of these before the First World War were a government inquiry into superannuations in the railway companies in 1907, and another to enquire into Railway Agreements and Amalgamations, appointed in 1909. Both, especially the first, resulted in important concessions for railway clerks.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> The Railway Clerk, November, 1911, p. 225.

<sup>63</sup> See The R.C.A. and its Path of Progress, pp. 15-16, and pp. 20-23. See also Malcolm Wallace, pp. 46-8.

The R.S.A. was also able to use its power in Parliament to block railway bills in order to push forward its demands and gain concessions from the rail companies. This was a very effective weapon of the union in the years running up to the First World War. One particular reason for this was because of over-competition amongst the railway companies which led to costly price wars and reduced profits. The answer to this was mergers and operating agreements amongst the companies, and increases in charges. All needed parliamentary approval, and it was here, where the companies were most vulnerable, that the R.C.A. repeatedly struck. Parliamentary bills were 'blocked' in 1909 against the North-Eastern Railway Company, and in 1913 against the Midland Company. In both cases, the railway companies were intimidating clerks who became members of the R.C.A., and in both cases the union was successful in opposing this.<sup>64</sup>

Parliamentary action lay at the centre of the operational strategy of the Railway Clerks Association as it did amongst the other clerical unions. For a sector of workers for whom the strike weapon was unsuitable, both in terms of the unwillingness of many clerks to strike and the relative ease of 'blacklegging' striking clerical work, the use of politicians and parliament was the perfect answer. It was both respectable and effective. It was this political tool, along with propaganda and an attempt to foster public opinion that clerical unions used, to varying degrees of success, between 1890 and 1914.

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<sup>64</sup> The R.C.A and its Path of Progress, pp. 24-6., and p. 31.

## Collective Action and Clerical Values

Was there an inherent contradiction between being a clerk and being a member of a trade union or association? Did one exclude the other? On August 18<sup>th</sup>, 1912, for example, the correspondence was read to the Executive Committee of the National Union of Clerk's London Central Branch. A Miss E.S. Nunn had returned her Insurance Card, Book, and other items (the N.U.C. offered social insurance, and had recently insisted that those subscribing to these facilities should become a member of the union), and stated that she could not join the organisation on account of it being a trade union. Five other members had written to the union in the same strain.<sup>65</sup> Fifteen years later, the R.S.A. wrote that when the union was founded in 1897, '...All the traditions of clerical employees were against the idea of trade unionism.'<sup>66</sup> Frequent references were found in The Clerk to the snobbishness and disdain of the average clerk for trade unionism. The failure of the majority of clerks to join the union was put down to the incompatibility of collective action with the individualism of the clerk, his overriding desire to be respectable and his abhorrence of anything that smacked of the working classes.<sup>67</sup>

The main problem with this argument is that a significant minority of clerks did belong to some type of collective professional organisation, some unions, some not,

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<sup>65</sup> 'National Union of Clerks London Central Branch Minute Book, 1<sup>st</sup> May 1911 to 30<sup>th</sup> June, 1914', August 18<sup>th</sup>, 1912.

<sup>66</sup> The R.C.A. and its Path of Progress, p. 6.

<sup>67</sup> See Geoffrey Crossick 'The Edmergence of the Lower-middle class in Britain: A Discussion', in G. Crossick (ed.), The Lower-middle class in Britain, (London: Croom Helm, 1977), p. 27.



and an even larger minority would do so during and after the First World War with no essential re-structuring of clerical social values. In addition, the dichotomy between a unionised working class and a non-unionised clerical or even lower-middle class group is far too simple. Most working people in Britain throughout this period did not belong to a union, and within the union movement there was considerable diversity.<sup>68</sup> In addition, as Harold Perkin has shown, many middle class groups were organising themselves in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>69</sup> Finally failure to unionise probably had as much to do with structural factors within work itself, as it had to do with class prejudice.

In relation to clerks, it is important to point out that social organisation can be argued to be one of their defining features, as it was amongst the broader middle class to which they belonged.<sup>70</sup> Their commitment to individualism can be easily exaggerated. Clerks, as an important segment of the lower-middle class, wanted to lead a life style that was beginning to emerge among the more established middle classes in this period, one based on consumption, leisure, sport, holidays, education, etc. They lacked, however, the financial means to do this. They subsequently tended to club together to subsidise collectively each other in their quest for this way of life. The sporting clubs, social organisations, holiday associations, and night classes that have been evidenced throughout this study are all examples of the collective spirit of clerical workers and their families. An examination of the Ilford Guardian between 1898 and 1901 has revealed fifty three different associations in a thriving London suburb which contained a large proportion of clerical workers and their families. An

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<sup>68</sup> See Keith Laybourn, A History of British Trade Unionism c. 1770-1990, p. 79.

<sup>69</sup> Harold Perkin, The Rise of Professional Society. England Since 1880, (London: Routledge, 1989), Chapter I.

<sup>70</sup> See R.J. Morris, Class, Sect and Party: the making of the British Middle Class, Leeds 1820-50, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), passim.

additional eleven societies appeared in the Town Council's promotional brochure in 1911.<sup>71</sup> Such private, voluntary bodies included sports clubs, recreational societies, self-help groups, church clubs and political organisations.

Another example of this spirit of co-operation amongst clerical workers was the establishment of the Public Servant Association in June 1914. The Association opened a co-operative store at 210 Westminster Bridge Road later that year for the capital's estimated 80,000 public servants. The Association was inaugurated by representatives from a large number of public bodies, including the local government and the Civil Service, and was founded to, '...promote the economic and social well-being of its members'.<sup>72</sup> From the perspective of collective action there was not much difference between joining the above association and being a member of a clerical union. Both, whilst having different aims, attempted collectively to achieve what the individual could not.

The aims of most of these organisations also conformed with general clerical values. There was no real contradiction between what many clerks wanted individually, and what these bodies sought to achieve. Clerical unions and associations attempted collectively to enhance the power of the individual at work. Their demand for the acceptance and full integration of the principal of merit at work is an excellent example of this. Clerical unions repeatedly emphasised that their goal was to enforce this sacred principle for the benefit of the individual and for the organisation they worked for. Discussing this in late 1911, for example, The Railway Clerk wrote,

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<sup>71</sup> Ilford Guardian 1898-1901. See also London Borough of Redbridge Library, 'Ilford, Including Seven Kings and Goodmayes. The Official Publication of The Urban District Council', 1911.

<sup>72</sup> The L.C.C. Staff Gazette, July, 1914, p. 160?

We all like to think of Merit as being synonymous with Success, but of course as abstract terms they do not exist...As railway clerks cease to hibernate, so they become alive to the fact that their employers choose to make much of the term merit. And when those same employer are asked to define 'merit', there is either great ambiguity, or no answer at all. There is then the feeling of distrust on the part of the enquirer and a prescience is formed that merit will be a mysterious something to conjure up as occasion requires.<sup>73</sup>

The message here was clear. The railway companies liked to talk merit but failed to deliver. As a result, bad faith and distrust plagued the industry. The R.C.A. as a collective body would therefore become the custodian of the principle, force the issue and create a working environment, as the article later argued, that was congenial for railway clerk and company alike.<sup>74</sup>

Another key clerical value which the unions supported was the clerk's commitment to the domestic sphere. This included his desire to marry, establish a home, and to maintain it at an adequate level. Both of these were fundamental to a clerk's sense of masculinity. Promotion was not longed for simply as an end in itself, but also as a means of obtaining more money which was seen as essential in terms of setting up a marital home. As Red Tape wrote in 1911, tying together the two themes of a gradually increasing income and the eventual domestic responsibilities of the clerk, '...If manhood means anything at all, it means progressive development and fulfilment. Does anyone really believe that self-realisation is possible on £45 a year, paid monthly, or that the duties and responsibilities of later years can be properly

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<sup>73</sup> The Railway Clerk, December, 1911, p. 245.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

discharged on £150?'.<sup>75</sup> Money was crucial to a clerk's concept of manhood. Without it he could not marry, establish a decent home, rear a family, and thus, in his own terms of reference, become a man in the true sense of the word.

This link between work and the domestic sphere was one which was central to clerks and was supported by clerical unions. Clerks, as members of a larger middle class worked with the primary goal in mind of establishing and maintaining a house which pertained to certain levels of consumption and standards crystalised in the Victorian concept of respectability.<sup>76</sup> This is clearly evidenced in the 'Civil Service Sketches', referred to earlier in Red Tape where the desire to establish and maintain a respectable home was continuously juxtaposed to the impossibility of doing so on the income the Assistant Clerk in the Civil Service actually obtained. It was a point which was made when Mr. David Milne gave evidence to the MacDonnell Commission as a representative of the A.S.A. Questioned whether economists would agree with the A.S.A. in their claims of increases in the cost of living, Milne told the Commission that assistant clerks came from a group of boys who had received a secondary education and came from comfortable and decent homes. A living wage calculated for a working class family living in Whitechapel was hardly appropriate for one of his colleagues.<sup>77</sup> The A.S.A.'s and other clerical unions' demands for a living wage was one which related specifically to the class background of the individuals concerned. It was a demand which in no way conflicted with a clerk's sense of masculinity, and indeed may have assisted in the growth of some white-collar unions.

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<sup>75</sup> Red Tape, December, 1911, p. 3.

<sup>76</sup> See Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850, (London: Hutchinson, 1987). See also Robert Q Gray, The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), Chapter 7.

<sup>77</sup> Fifty-Sixth Report of the Royal Commission, 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1912, p. 315.

This emphasis by the clerical unions on supporting accepted gender roles was mirrored in their antipathy to female clerks, both in terms of entering the clerical profession and the unions themselves. While the unions admitted female clerks from their inception and claimed to want to ameliorate working conditions for both sexes their action did not often match their rhetoric.<sup>78</sup> From the actions and comments of the male majority members in these unions (the N.U.C. had 12% members in 1914), it is clear that women clerks were viewed as being one of the principle causes of the perceived decline in clerical incomes and working conditions, and were thus viewed by many with hostility (see Chapter V).

On October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1908, for example, the National Union of Clerks held a public meeting in Brockwell-Park, Brixton, to protest against the employment of cheap female labour. A crowd of over 2,000 people were reported to have assembled around a wagon, over which a prominent banner bore the words, 'Are you a Clerk?'.<sup>79</sup> In the same edition of the journal a letter from the female clerical trade unionist activist, Mary E. Taplin was published. The letter bitterly complained about an article written in the same magazine by the General Secretary of the N.U.C., in which he wrote of his hope, whilst discussing the unhygienic conditions of offices, of the ideal time when female-labour would not be known in factory, workshop or office.<sup>80</sup> Taplin vigorously protested the right of women at work to be treated on an equal basis as men, and hoped that the majority of members of the Union did not share the same sentiments as the General Secretary. Despite this, articles and letters still continued to

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<sup>78</sup> See Lee Holcombe, Victorian Ladies at Work Middle-Working Women in England and Wales 1850-1914, pp. 152-62.

<sup>79</sup> The Clerk, November, 1908, p. 158.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

be published in The Clerk complaining and warning about the increased use of women in the office. Similar hostilities were also evident in the R.C.A.<sup>81</sup>

### **The Progressive Clerk**

Finally, in discussing the issue of collective action and clerical workers it is important not to conflate clerks into one homogenous mass. Within the whole there were various sub-sectors. One group of clerical workers who were certainly drawn to trade unionism were progressive clerks. The concept of a 'progressive London' as a sub-sector of the capital drawing together individuals, clubs, societies, political and economic movements, and constituting an important element of its civil society, is a very useful tool for the purposes of this particular discussion. The collection itself was composed of a heterogeneous number of groups who were linked, often tenuously, in their opposition to the hegemonic contemporary discourses of liberal economics, utilitarianism, imperialism and the growing influence of corporate capitalism. Many of these groups and individuals were influenced in their critique of state and society by the English nineteenth century counter-discourses of radicalism and idealism, the latter heavily influenced in this period by the writings of T.H. Green and F.H. Bradley, which led to calls for social and political reform.<sup>82</sup> Such groups covered a wide range of organisations, some political, some not, within the capital. They included political groups, co-operative organisations, religious bodies, women's groups, educational bodies, and unions.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> See Malcolm Wallace, Single or Return The History of the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association, (London: Transport Salaried Staffs' Association, 1996), pp. 96-8.

<sup>82</sup> See Ian Aitken, Film and Reform John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement, (London: Routledge, 1990), Chapters I and VIII.

<sup>83</sup> For a discussion of radical and anti-imperial groups in London see Jonathon Schneer, London 1900 The Imperial Metropolis, (New Have and London: Yale University Press, 1999)

Within this movement clerks played a part. Susan Pennybacker, for example, in her study of the L.C.C. has located a number of progressive officials within the Council.<sup>84</sup>

One such individual was Daniel McEwen. McEwen was a clerk in the Office of the Official Receivers in Bankruptcy attached to the High Court. He was an active member of the co-operative movement, was for a period a committee member of the Tenants Co-operation Co., and even lived with his wife in two of their properties. He lectured at one point on socialism in a University Extension Class, wrote articles on Trade Unions and had connections with the Fabians. McEwen was an active member of progressive society in Camberwell where he lived, and his diaries, which cover the period 1887 to 1909, are full of detail of his activities within this world.<sup>85</sup>

A number of individuals such as McEwen, and those L.C.C. officials described by Pennybacker, became members of clerical unions, and found no problem in doing so. A significant number of these unions were highly political. Membership of them provided a gateway into the vibrant socialist, radical and progressive life of the capital. This was particularly so in relation to the National Union of Clerks. An examination, for example, of the Minute Book of the London Central Branch of the N.U.C. reveals a group of individuals who were very political. The Branch sent delegates to the Women's Trade Union League. It had connections with the Independent Labour Party and the Fabians with whom it co-operated in a movement in 1912 called 'The War Against Poverty'. It participated with the Independent Labour Party and another group, the L&S.C.D.C., in a conference protesting against the increase in armaments. It also, via the London Trades Council, had connections to

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<sup>84</sup> See Susan Pennybacker, A Vision for London, 1889-1914: Labour, Everyday Life and the L.C.C. Experiment, (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 35-6. and pp. 53-4.

<sup>85</sup> Southwark Archives, MS-1982/117, 'The Diary of Daniel McEwen, 1887-1910'

the Labour Party and other socialist and labour bodies in London. In the Inter-War period, the N.U.C. as a whole continued its political activities, devoting much energy, for example, to the League of Nations Union.<sup>86</sup>

It can therefore be argued that there was no inherent obstacle preventing clerks from becoming members of a trade union or association. This is not to deny that many clerks in this period did not become members of such groups, because they thought it was socially beneath them, or that they were committed to individual rather than collective approaches. This phenomenon, however, was not exclusive to clerks. Clerks were equally happy to organise in many areas, created organisations that were specifically sensitive to their needs, and to some degree did unionise. The question that this chapter will end with is therefore why did some sectors of clerical workers unionise and others not?

### **Structural Pre-conditions of Clerical Collective Action**

Some sectors of clerical work were organised, some were left untouched. Railway clerks and civil servants were far more amenable to trade unionism than bank clerks or commercial clerical workers. Such distinctions have led commentators to the conclusion that there must have been structural factors at work affecting collective action. Office environments which had become concentrated, centralised and bureaucratised, where pay structure and staff policy were determined by impersonal codes and procedures, rather than on a personal and individual basis, were those where organisation was most likely to take place. Under these conditions, it made

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<sup>86</sup> See British Library of Political and Economic Science Archives Division, LNU/5/70, 'League of Nations Union, Staff Standing Committee, 1926-39'



sense for clerks to negotiate collectively with management rather than do so individually as senior decisions affected everybody. Since this was a feature of large scale concerns it appears to explain why clerks in the Post Office, the Civil Service and the Railway Companies began to unionise.<sup>87</sup> While there is much strength in this argument, there are also weaknesses. If concentration was the chief factor there should have been unionisation in the banks and insurance offices where such conditions held sway. Both these sectors, however, failed to unionise. In addition, railway clerks at head office, where centralisation and bureaucratic conditions were most advanced, tended not to unionise.<sup>88</sup> Concentration on its own is thus not an adequate explanation.

The answer lies in concentration, and two other factors which have been addressed in this chapter, politics and level of income. The first area is relatively straightforward. White-collar unions and associations were effective where there was an opportunity to use politics and parliament. All the collective bodies that were successful in attracting significant numbers in this period, the Railway Clerks Association, the post office clerks' unions, the civil service associations, and the local government organisations, were in public or semi-public sectors where the use of the parliamentary weapon was feasible. All won pay increases and other concessions in the years running up to 1914 and beyond with the assistance of political action. Political support often protected these unions during their initial years and enabled them to attract members. Without the chance to exercise this system of attack and defence, fledgling unions were often unable to exist in hostile environments in which superiors were frequently opposed to their development.

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<sup>87</sup> See Gregory Anderson, *Victorian Clerks*, pp. 110-111.

<sup>88</sup> See *The Railway Clerk*, October, 1911, p. 210.

The second area of income is more problematic. Low income levels as a cause of clerical unionisation has previously been rejected on the basis of figures published by the British Association in 1910 which showed the percentage of salaried employees earning over £160. These figures showed insurance clerks and banking clerks being the top earners, 46% and 44% of them respectively earning over this figure, with only 23% of commercial clerk doing so. Civil Service clerks also appear to be a relatively affluent group with 37% of them earning over £160.<sup>89</sup> Gregory Anderson has argued that since Civil Servants unionised, pay did not appear to be an important factor in determining the formation of clerical unions. He also argued that bank clerks became rapidly unionised in the 1920's, thus further weakening the significance of income.<sup>90</sup>

There are, however, several major problems with this argument. The first concerns bank clerks. While it is true that a significant proportion of this group unionised in the 1920s, this was the result of the failure of the banks to increase salaries sufficiently in the years during and immediately after the First World War when there was heavy inflation. Bank clerks went from being one of the highest paid sectors of clerical workers to one of the worst paid. As a result, while there was no unionisation in this group during their heyday in the years covered in this study, significant segments did organise when bank clerks suffered severe economic decline. Here is clear proof of the existence of a correlation between income and degrees of unionisation among clerical workers.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> The R.C.A. and its Path of Progress, p. 29.

<sup>90</sup> Anderson, p. 109.

<sup>91</sup> See F.D. Klingender, The Condition of Clerical Labour in England, (London: Martin Lawrence, 1935), pp. 47-8.

Additionally, the statistic of 37% civil servants earning over £160 should also be treated with extreme caution. The term 'civil servant' is an extremely difficult term to define in this period. Did this figure simply refer to those working in government departments, or did it also include the Post Office, and other areas such as the British Museum, for example? The question is extremely pertinent as government employees were among the first to unionise.

It would appear that this figure did not include post office clerks as their salary scales were far too low for this figure to have any real relevance. Statistics provided by the R.C.A. showed post office clerks in London receiving 18/- at age 17 and rising gradually to 65/- (£169 p.a.), and less in other cities and provincial areas.<sup>92</sup> While there would have been better paid senior positions beyond this, these figures do not appear to suggest that more than a third of this group were earning £160 p.a. and over. This is particularly so as the workforce of the postal service, which had expanded rapidly in this period, would have been relatively young. If postal clerks, telegraphists and other manipulative workers had been included, it is arguable that the figure would have been lower. Even if, in the unlikely event, this was the case, it is clear that this figure does not reveal very much about post office incomes in 1910. In relation to this later point, the same can be said in relation to the Assistant Clerks of the Civil Service whose salary scale in 1910 ranged from only £45 to £150 p.a.<sup>93</sup>

From the immediate evidence it appears that low income was a factor in unionisation before 1914. All the successful clerical unions which continued to maintain their momentum after 1918 were in low paid sectors. The Railway Clerks, Post Office

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<sup>92</sup> The Life of a Railway Clerk, p. 16.

<sup>93</sup> Fourth Report from the Royal Commission, pp. 21-22.

Clerks and more mechanical grades of the Civil Service were all low paid *and organised*. The Second Division Clerks Association is a case in point. The organisation failed to maintain a continuous existence between 1890 and 1914, and it is unlikely that it attracted as many members as its more radical counter part, the Assistant Clerks Association.<sup>94</sup> In addition, the association neither developed a journal, developed contacts with the Labour Party, or succeeded in its demands to the MacDonnell Commission. In contrast to the Assistant Clerks Association, its members were much higher paid, with scales ranging between £70 and £300 p.a.<sup>95</sup>

Concentration, access to politicians and formal political procedures and level of income were the three key factors in determining clerical unionisation between 1890 and 1914. All were found in the sectors where clerks were able to organise. It is these factors which explain why such collective action began in the public sector and has remained so strong there. It also helps to explain the failure of the National Union of Clerks to develop as a trade union. Those areas which were most amenable to trade unionism had already been usurped by other organisations. The N.U.C. found itself in a terrain which proved, in many cases, simply unresponsive to its solicitations.

## **Conclusion**

Trade Unionism and other forms of clerical professional collective organisations provide a fascinating avenue from which to observe clerks in London and Britain between 1890 and 1914. While their development was uneven within the group as a

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<sup>94</sup> Humphreys, pp. 45-7., & p. 57.

<sup>95</sup> Fourth Report of the Royal Commission, p. 19.

whole, it certainly took place, and should be included in any analysis of this sector of workers. This chapter has argued that one should take a much more flexible approach when discussing clerical unions and other collective bodies. Rather than take an exclusive view of such bodies based on some ideal-type of trade union organisation, analysis should take account of the diversity of these organisations, both unions and non-unions alike. In addition, while it is correct to see clerical unions proper as a manifestation of the 'New Unionism' of the period, these unions had their own particular characteristics. A rejection of the strike weapon, an overwhelming emphasis on the institutionalisation of merit in the workplace, sufficient training and professional examinations, and the demand for a living salary tailored to the requirements of a lower-middle class family made these bodies distinct. The singularity of these organisations, and the negotiating structures that developed around them, themselves a part of their strategy, were clearly related to the fact they catered for the needs of office workers, a group who were different from other manipulative workers who similarly organised themselves.

Within this context, it is also important to note that the idea that the clerical workers were somehow essentially antithetical to collective action should be rejected. The large numbers of clerks who did organise themselves, both inside unions and other associations, the compatibility of many of these organisations' aims with clerical values, and the difficulty in trying to treat such a diverse group as an homogeneous whole should preclude this. Structural conditions in the workplace were the principle factors in deciding whether clerks became organised or not. In this respect, concentration, the opportunity for politics to be used effectively, *and* prevailing low

incomes were the most important predeterminants. It is this which explains why clerical unions first appeared in the railways and public sector.

Nevertheless, one should not see structural factors, or even ideological constraints for that matter, as the sole grounds for collective action. Workers generally organise, both now and in the past, if they feel under pressure at work. The failure of many clerks to unionise in this period was probably as much to do with the lack of such pressure as it had to do with any positive factors. With salaries increasing, with offices work expanding, and with openings and opportunities growing year by year, unions and similar bodies for many clerks in the Metropolis may simply have held no appeal. It is here, in this lack of unionisation amongst clerical workers in the capital, in the failure of the National Union of Clerks to attract more than 12,500 individuals out of a potential membership nationwide of 600,000, that one sees a major refutation of Gregory Anderson's argument, and those that support him, that working conditions were deteriorating for clerks in the thirty or so years running up to the First World War.

## Conclusion

In May 1913 an article was published in Red Tape by W.J. Sheriff of the Civil Service Federation (an organisation which attempted to link all the unions and associations of the Service) entitled, 'Civil Service Agitation – How Not to Do It'.<sup>1</sup> The article aimed at providing friendly advice to the Assistant Clerks Association and other kindred associations whose agitation for reform in the Civil Service at the time, as a result of the ongoing MacDonnell Commission, was reaching a peak. Sheriff advised civil servants against wasting their energy in in-fighting amongst the differing grades. In addition, the article criticised the grades and associations for not presenting a common front to the Commission. It was, however, in his advice to civil servants not to exaggerate their grievances that the most pertinent points in relation to this conclusion were made. While Sheriff congratulated the various associations and their members on the high quality of their literary output he warned against exaggeration,

The overstatement, however, to which I am complaining is seen more in the journalistic side of agitation. Editors – and, even more, correspondents – in Service and other journals do not always remember that these are the only source from which the public and the hierarchy are likely to cull any fresh information about State employees. Led on by righteous indignation they don't always play the game. The result is that the average Service paper presents an unbroken vista of long hours, low pay, and sweating conditions. It is not suggested that the facts stated are not the truth; it is only too true that many Civil Servants are working longer hours than they were originally

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<sup>1</sup> Red Tape, May, 1913, p. 126.

intended to, or that they are ever paid for, and that there are many scales of salary where the shoe pinches at certain ages, and even some where it never ceases to pinch; that conditions often arise where a self-respecting man cannot possibly do his work in the time officially allotted. But that isn't the whole truth, and the fact remains that, taken all round, as general labour conditions go, it isn't such a bad old Service after all. And that's just where the mischief arises, for the higher official knows this, and the great British public thinks it knows it too.<sup>2</sup>

It should be remembered that the basic historic argument of decline and crisis amongst British clerical workers between 1880 and 1914, first formulated by Klingender and later reproduced in Britain, amongst other writers, by Anderson and more recently Wilson, first saw light in clerical trade union journals in the 1900s similar to those Sheriff was criticising for not stating the whole truth and being prone to hyperbole. While all may not have been perfect for clerks in the years running up to 1914, while for many in the lower echelons of clerical grades there may certainly have been some hardship, to argue that the profession was in terminal decline was quite simply exaggeration. The problem, however, is that while many of the 'great British public' may have recognised this at the time, as the years went by this became less and less the case. Contemporary trade union polemics, mixed with a dose of political dogma, imperceptibly became historical truths.

This thesis rejects this argument. It is impressionistic and not sustained by any substantial evidence. As B.G. Orchard argued in the first study of British clerks

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



written 130 years ago, 'Too much has been said and written of the disadvantages connected with this branch of employment; for inquiry does not corroborate the angry complaints which are often heard.'<sup>3</sup> The evidence unearthed by this research thoroughly supports this evaluation.

The argument for the decline of clerical workers was based on the premise that the increase in the scale of operations in offices in the second half of the nineteenth century and the sheer increase in the number of clerical workers changed a group of workers from an affluent and exclusive profession to one which was increasingly impoverished and destitute. This argument was supported by the supposed pernicious effects of the rise of mass education, the application of technology and the entry of women into the clerical profession. This study has looked at each of these arguments and found that this overall this did not appear to be the case. The increasing importance of secondary, higher and further education mitigated the effects of mass elementary education. Technology facilitated rather than decimated clerical labour. Women mainly replaced boys and youths, and were overwhelmingly concentrated in secondary clerical markets, often to the benefit of male clerks.

Arguments over the increase in the size of operations should also be treated with caution. Many offices up until 1914 remained small, and those that grew, principally concentrated in certain sectors such as rail, banking, government and utilities, attempted to mitigate the pernicious effects of expansion such as anonymity and the break down in personal working relations by the provision of social welfare and sporting and social facilities. At the same time growth in size of some operations

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<sup>3</sup> B.G. Orchard, The Clerks of Liverpool, (Liverpool: J. Collinson, 1871).

often meant that clerks were able to meet men and women of a similar age and form in many cases close friendships. Growth in the number of clerks also had no overall negative effect. In general, clerical incomes in London rose, in some cases quite considerably, and opportunities for promotion in no way diminished. Clerical work continued to be stable. Unemployment, though ever-present, remained a relatively rare experience.

How was this the case? How were most clerks able to maintain or even improve their standard of living and social position in the face of large increases in clerical numbers and such seismic structural changes to their profession? The simple answer, as maintained in chapter one, is that growth in the clerking profession in London was more than compensated by the growth in its overall economy. Expansion in finance, transport, commerce, retailing, distribution, government and other service industries meant that growth in clerical recruitment was accompanied by increases in income and mobility. In simple economic terms demand outstripped supply. In addition, much of this growth can be seen as the growth in a global economy with London at its centre. Many of the sectors studied in this thesis such as banking, insurance and transport witnessed expansion as a result of this. Domestic and international factors thus exerted positive synergies which led to structural changes in London's economy and resulted in a sharp increase in the demand for clerical labour. The more intensive application of women and technology to office work was one consequence of this in an effort by organisations to keep costs down. What is ironic, as this study has argued, is that far from having harmful affects on the majority of male clerks, the consequences were benign. They kept costs down, were chiefly

employed in routine and mechanical work, and thus provided leeway for increases in male clerical salaries and opportunities for promotion and career chances.

It must be bore in mind, however, that the distribution and extent of these benefits were not uniform in London in the thirty five years covered in this study. Some benefited more than others, and these benefits were more abundant in the first half of the period than they were in the latter. While this does not compromise the overall arguments put forward in this thesis, it does present limitations, and prevent one from constructing too rosy a picture of the London office and clerk.

In relation to the first, the growth of secondary labour markets, as outlined in Chapter One, should not be forgotten. While this was certainly an uneven process, with some sectors such as banking being unaffected, and others such as insurance and the Post Office being transformed, the bifurcation of the London clerical market was a constant feature of the period, and was one which continued and accelerated during the First World War and throughout the Inter-War period. It is interesting to note, for example, that Booth did not comment on this division of labour of clerical work in his study of London life and labour in the 1890s, whereas during the thirties this division had plainly been observed by the teams of investigators from the London School of Economics, and was subsequently highlighted in their section on London clerks.<sup>4</sup>

While the existent of a dual market pre-dated this study, its growth was accompanied by a structural transformation between 1880 and 1914, as argued in Chapter Five, of a

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Booth, Life and Labour in London, Second Series, Industry, Book 3, (London: Macmillan & Co. Limited, 1903), pp. 277-8., London School of Economics and Social Sciences, New Survey of London Life and Labour Vol. VIII London Industries II, (London: P.S. King & Son Ltd., 1934), p. pp. 272-3.

body made up predominantly of youths, to one comprised chiefly of women. Despite this, however, there were considerable numbers of men in these secondary markets. While this in itself was no inherent evil, the growth of these sectors allowed segments of society, particularly members of the working classes such as William Evans and his brothers, to enter white collar work and achieve in their eyes social mobility<sup>5</sup>, this growing split invariably resulted in increasing inequalities in the clerical sector. Clerks in secondary positions did share in the benefits which issued from the growth in clerical work, they did not do so, however, equally, and it was this, as evidenced in the growth of clerical unions and associations, which galled and harrowed many clerical workers. The officers of the Assistant Clerks grade of the Civil Service, for instance, despised the fact that despite their secondary education and abilities, their ambitions for promotion, more demanding and responsible work, and increases in salaries were all denied to them because of a hierarchical structure which appeared to be based more on class rather than inherent merit.<sup>6</sup>

In relation to the extent of the increasing rewards of clerical work, there is evidence which strongly suggests that to some extent there was a contraction following 1900. The growth of the R.C.A. and the Assistant Clerks Association, and to a lesser extent the N.U.C., the £200 Barrier Campaign amongst the officers of the L.C.C., the inauguration of the MacDonnell and the Holt Commissions by the government to investigate working conditions in the Civil Service and Post Office, and the increase in prices following the turn of the century all point to this. Much of the heady growth

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<sup>5</sup> William Evans' father Edmund Evans was a carpenter. Out of his four sons, three became clerks. Equally interesting is that both his neighbours in Homerton, Hackney, a working-class area, were artisans, and both had sons who became clerks, London Borough of Hackney Archives Department, DS/EVA/1-3, 'The Diaries of William Evans, 1881-84, 1889-1900'.

<sup>6</sup> See Red Tape, 'Better Prospects, A Suggestion', January, 1912, p. 2., and *Ibid.*, 'Of the Charmed Circle', February, 1913, p. 83.

of the 1880s and 1890s began to tailor off by 1900. The 1911 census, for example, while showing an overall small increase for male clerks in London, did actually reveal a reduction in male commercial clerks from 84,317 in 1901 to 82,027 in 1911.<sup>7</sup> Since these were by far the largest group of London clerks this fall was significant. While this did not invariably lead to lay offs, pay cuts or cut backs, it did mean that the rate of improvements which many clerks may have begun to have grown accustomed to began to slow down. Amongst the larger corporate employers, for instance, there were signs of slow down. The R.C.A. argument that a diminishing of organic growth in the railways had led to a slow down of promotion opportunities was an indication of how this adversely affected clerks.<sup>8</sup> Merger for many of the larger organisations appeared to be the most logical solution. The merger of the London and County Bank with the London and Westminster Bank in 1909, for example, was a sign of things to come. Following the First World War, for instance, there were major mergers across British businesses, including the Banking and Railway sectors.<sup>9</sup> These were often greeted with apprehension by clerks, fearful of the rationalising tendencies which followed, often mixed with heavy doses of feminisation.

In addition, it should not be believed that clerical workers in London, either at work, at home or in their community, were ever completely at ease, despite many of the material improvements that was taking place in their lives. Status insecurity, the fear of losing social respect, whether real or imagined, or of being deprived of the respect

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<sup>7</sup> Census of England and Wales 1901-1911, (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1901-1911).

<sup>8</sup> See The Life of a Railway Clerk. Some Interesting Facts and Figures, (London: Railway Clerks Association, 1911), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> For the Inter-war merger movement see John F. Wilson, British Business History, 1720-1994, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), Chapter 5. In relation to the railway industry see Frank McKenna, The Railway Workers 1840-1970, (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), pp. 61-2. In relation to the banking sector see Edwin Green, Debtors to their Profession, (London: Methuen & Co., 1979), pp. 97-9.

which one felt one was entitled to, was something which appears to have hounded the lives of many a clerical worker. Status insecurity was inherent to the lower middle class to which clerks belonged. Below them was a working class, the higher echelons of whom earned much the same as them, and above was a middle and upper middle class who often mocked the pretensions of a class that aped their way of life yet lacked the means and often the culture to fully realise it. Furthermore, the socially dynamic late-Victorian and Edwardian period witnessed increased organisation, political power and consumption amongst the workers, and a more affluent and remote middle class who were able more and more to distance themselves from the rest of society.<sup>10</sup> This did little to allay the fears of a growing white collar community.

Internal as much as external sources led to such insecurities. As has been maintained in this thesis, clerical workers were highly competitive as a group who keenly fought amongst each to achieve or maintain not only promotion and esteem at work, but also social dominancy. This often led to highly exaggerated claims being placed on marks and symbols of social distinction to almost comical affect. The novels and short stories of the former clerk William Pett Ridge, a little known figure now, but in his day a highly popular writer, skilfully and sympathetically recreated the working, family, and community lives of countless clerks with unbounded ambitions in their search for social esteem and arrival. His collection of short stories, Outside the Radius, for example, beautifully recreated the social lives of the clerical inhabitants of 'The Crescent', a small residential cul-de-sac in an unknown suburb somewhere

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<sup>10</sup> For increases in the purchasing powers of the working class see John Benson, The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain 1880-1980, (London: Longman, 1994), pp. 26-7. For the lower-middle class or 'suburban' fear of marginalisation see C.F.G. Masterman, The Condition of England, (London: Methuen & Co., 1909), Chapter III.

outside London.<sup>11</sup> Each story was imbued with the social jockeying and pretensions of the inhabitants of this street in their ceaseless attempts to impress each other. While the stories were comical and exaggerated, they succinctly tell us of the feelings of social unease of the clerical worker, and the many ghouls and shadows who inhabited his everyday suburban avenues.

The answer to the question of how did employers react to these changes has already been partially answered. In many large scale organisations, both in the public and private sector, corporate patronage in the guise of social welfare, company magazines and leisure facilities such as sport and social clubs were introduced or encouraged in an effort to integrate staff into these bodies. At the sports club dinner of the London County and Westminster Bank in 1913, for instance, the chairman of the bank, Lord Goschen, gave a speech. Commenting on the enlargement of the pavilion on the bank's Norbury sports ground he observed,

...I should like to say that the directors, as I have said, think this is an object to which the bank can well contribute, because we believe that in furthering the interests of the Sports Club we are at the same time furthering the interests of the bank. Owing to the prosperity of the Sports Club we have a happier and healthier staff.<sup>12</sup>

What is interesting is that company welfare such as pensions and orphans and widow funds, company journals and leisure facilities made their appearance at roughly the same time in large organisations at the turn of the twentieth century. They were

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<sup>11</sup> William Pett Ridge, *Outside the Radius*, (London: Hodder & Stroughton, 1899)

<sup>12</sup> *The County Magazine*, 1913, p. 173.

clearly a strategic response by these bodies to structural changes in their staffing operations and relations.

In addition, there were important developments in the work that clerks performed for companies over the space of their entire working lives. Many employers assisted in the development of career structures for their clerical workers. This was still very much at a rudimentary stage and was in no way universal. In the pay structures devised by some, however, as seen in chapter three, and in the hierarchies and job titles that this entailed, one sees details of this. It is also evidenced in the tendency for companies to recruit more senior positions internally. In addition, the support that employers gave to commercial education, examined in Chapter Six, further facilitated this process. This support came in several guises; in direct provision such as by the railways, in group support such as by the London Chamber of Commerce or the Institute of bankers or by the recognition and rewards that individual organisations gave to their employees for holding these qualifications. Up to 500 leading firms in London, for example, agreed to give preference to holders of the London Chamber of Commerce Diploma when engaging assistants.<sup>13</sup> Banks offered a gratuity of £10 to clerks passing the first or second part of the Institute of Bankers examination.<sup>14</sup> The establishment of career paths was another means by which companies and governmental offices hoped to integrate their clerks into their organisations. Such structures meant that for many, especially the more ambitious, clerical work was not a mindless repetition of tasks which individuals performed throughout their working lives in anonymous institutions. Instead, it was increasingly a pathway with goals and fixed agendas.

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<sup>13</sup> Business Life, November-December, 1906, p. 409.

<sup>14</sup> Edwin Green, Debtors to their Profession, p. 65.



This last point is extremely important for the final major question of this research, the reaction of clerical workers themselves to changes in their working environment. In 1998 the sociologist Richard Sennett brought out a book entitled, The Corrosion of Character The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism.<sup>15</sup> The study was essentially an examination of office workers and professionals in the new working environment of the 1990s. Characterised by aspects such as ‘discontinuous reinvention of institutions’, ‘flexible specialisation’ and ‘concentration without centralisation’, terms one might add which are fully endorsed and used by modern corporations, Sennett sharply contrasted the new working environment of instability, short-termism and insecurity with the system which had been in place for over a hundred years before this. The latter was one defined by stability, order and continuity and can be broadly argued to reflect the system outlined in this research. The title of Sennett’s fourth chapter was ‘Illegible - Why Modern Forms of Labor are Difficult to Understand.’<sup>16</sup> Its importance for this study are clear. Clerical work in the period covered by this study was legible. It could clearly be understood as long as one played by the rules over the course of one’s working life. It had clearly defined parameters, goals and signifiers. It could be mapped out from the age of sixteen to sixty-five. Such ‘legibility’ can be seen in the poem ‘The Seven Ages’ written by a clerk at the London County Council. The poem was a parody of Shakespeare’s soliloquy in Twelfth Night where instead of the different phases of a man’s life from birth to death come the different stages of a clerk’s professional life from the junior (or novice) to,

...sad retirement and last farewell

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Sennett, The Corrosion of Character The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism, (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Chapter 4.

Sans work, sans colleagues, and sans screw!<sup>17</sup>

It was the realisation by clerical workers of this, of the willingness of many to play by the rules, to see ones job in the long term in which one slowly edged up the company, which can be argued to be the principal strategy which many took in relation to their work.

Within this paradigm came values of loyalty (both to and from the company), service, professionalism, hierarchy, order, mobility, seniority, individualism and merit. From this was derived a strange mixture of conservatism and radicalism. Clerks were conservative because they played a long game. Because they saw their careers in terms of thirty or forty years where income was regulated by scales, and promotion often dictated by seniority they were opposed to any changes to the structures which shaped their working lives. Clerical workers were extremely sensitive towards any attempts by employers to change the goal posts such as altering recruitment policy, changing pay scales or attempting to bring in outsiders for senior positions. At the same time clerks were radical in their support for meritocracy and individualism and their almost visceral antipathy to anything that smacked of cronyism, patronage or nepotism. As seen in Chapters Seven and Eight, meritocratic principles were crucial to clerks because they offered to a group low in economic capital but high in aspiration the opportunity for advancement in hierarchical working environments. The extent of their support has been seen in the support of some, when opportunities permitted, for white-collar unions and associations whose principal aims were often to protect and extend meritocratic principles at work. The campaign of the Assistant

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<sup>17</sup> London County Council Gazette, September, 1912, p. 172.

Clerks Association with support from the Second Division Clerks Association against the monopoly by privileged groups of First Division positions is an extremely good example of this.

On a more personal level, another key strategy of clerical workers was the development of the self, or in more contemporary terms, 'self-improvement'. This chiefly articulated itself in a commitment to education which as has been argued was a defining feature of many clerical workers. This commitment, as has been seen in Chapter Seven was evidenced in the extent of participation in and support for higher and further education, particularly in the commercial sphere, by London clerks. It can also be seen in their private study and reading, participation in debating societies and other self-improvement and cultural groups, and the high literary and academic standards of the work which they produced and published in their journals which ranged in topic from rail electrification to paths and temples in Celtic Britain.<sup>18</sup>

In relation to work, the centrality of self-improvement articulated itself through the clerk's concept of professionalism. As argued in Chapter Four, clerks took great pride in the skills that they need to carry out their duties: accuracy, tidiness, detail, etc. The craft-based nature of clerical work was encouraged and enhanced by the developments outlined in this study. With the growth in complexity of business operations and office duties came new demands. To their basic skills, were added secondary proficiencies: type-writing and shorthand, indexing, languages, commercial geography, law, statistics. Further reinforcement of this process was provided by the growth of comprehensive structures of commercial education in London, recognition

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<sup>18</sup> See The Railway Clerk, August, 1906, p. 1. and The County and Westminster Magazine, 1914, pp. 76-7.

and reward by employees, and the gradual evolution of system of professional examinations, many of which were organised by the emerging clerical associations of this period. The degree of commitment to professionalism by the clerical workers in London can be seen in the extent of their participation in commercial education, as witnessed in Chapter Seven.

This commitment to the self also inter-laced with their long term approach. One important element here was their strong attachment to education for their off-spring. Improvement and advancement was not just personal, it was also inter-generational. Reminiscent of what Bourdieu has termed 'social-trajectory', the tendency of some social groups to project themselves over periods of time, a central strategy of clerks was investment in their children's education so as to guarantee them better opportunities and chances than they themselves enjoyed.<sup>19</sup> This is clearly evidenced in the examples of Mr Frank Lee and Mr Alfred Pyle. Both individuals were sons of clerks, both attended grammar schools at some sacrifice to their parents, and both went onto clerical careers which were improvements on what their fathers had achieved. Mr Frank Lee, whose father was a confectioner's clerk, became Principal Assistant to the Chief Accountant at the London Electricity Board, Mr Alfred Pyle, whose father was a railway clerk, went onto a career in the Civil Service. In this context, the expansion of secondary education and grammar schools in London was a great boost both psychologically and practically to its clerical workers.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 109-112.

<sup>20</sup> See British Library, QD1/FLWE/183, Paul Thompson and Thea Vigne, *Family Life and Work Experience before 1918*, 'Mr. Frank Lee' and QD1/FLWE/63, 'Mr. Alfred Pyle'.

Finally, it should be noted that all these strategies that clerks developed and practised were aimed principally at one key goal, stability. While self-improvement and promotion certainly resulted in more money, that was not its chief aim. Of overriding importance to London clerical workers was their search for stability. Clerical workers were not, in the main, concerned with earning large sums of money or grandiose schemes of consumption. The principle aim of those married and with families (and for the majority of those single who aimed to become married and rear families) was to support and maintain a home at a decent level which was free of financial anxiety. Following the growing-up and leaving-home of their children it was to prepare for a retirement which allowed a certain degree of independence. It is because of this that attempts to estimate clerical incomes and compare these with those of the working class are unhelpful. It was not the amount that clerks earned that was important. Charles Booth was probably right when he said that the majority of London clerks earned no more than artisans. It was the fact that this income was stable, rose incrementally, and provided security thus enabling clerical workers to develop discursive strategies that emphasised education and deferred gratification which defined them, and enabled a degree of consumption that allowed for a modicum of middle class status and lifestyle that was important. For many it may not have been a very glamorous or exciting life, but at least it was a safe one. As Frank Lee said in his later years,

My parents always stressed the value of less money for a secure job, and apart from a very short period in my life I have always been fully employed and I've been very grateful for it. And looking back I suppose there are moments when I would have very much liked to have a more adventuresome and more

colourful sort of life, but of course, I'm reaping the fruits of the...shall we say  
the years of monotony by the things that a secure job has.<sup>21</sup>

It is a sentiment that many of the clerks studied in this research would have agreed  
with.

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<sup>21</sup> 'Mr Frank Lee', p. 56.

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The Civil Service then would have been seen as being more stable perhaps than the bank?

Yes.

So they would have look at it on a criterion of stability. That would have been ... Errm, I'd now like to ask you about your father's wider family. First of all, could I very quickly ask you about the job your grandfather did?

He worked for several firms, and he was basically a commercial traveller. He ended up working for a firm called Young & Rochester who sold menswear, shirts, etc., and he would travel around North and North-West London, hiring a cab, and he had a special driver who would take him to the various shops where he would explain what was on offer from Young and Rochester and take the orders. And he worked, in fact, until his seventieth birthday in 1920, because during the Great War, when he might have retired, many of the men had been taken to the Front, so they were only too happy that he stayed to continue. But the one thing that he did not have was a pension when he retired. Both my father and his elder brother were expected to contribute something towards his income and that continued until my father married in 1926, and then my grandfather died two years latter in 1928. My grandmother lived with one of her three daughters, a school teacher, a music school teacher, living and working near Stockport, Manchester area.

So basically, his children, your father, your uncle, when they would get work, it was perceived as important that they would work to contribute to the ...

Very much so, and I think the reason for wanting a job in either the Civil Service or the bank, and my uncle, my father's older brother, had joined Parr's Bank at the age of 16 in 1898, it was the fact that it was a good job to have, not particularly highly paid, but reliable and there would be a pension at the end of it, and above all, a feeling of security.

Right, did your father ever say how much of his income he had to give to your ...?

I have no idea

O.K., and do you think also, by your father, and your uncle getting the job, your grandfather, do you think he would have felt that as a form of social mobility, that the family was improving itself socially?

I don't know, quite honestly, I just think that it was obviously regarded as, a job in a bank or the civil service, was regarded as above a commercial traveller, certainly.

I see.

But it didn't seem to prevent my grandfather from becoming an elder at the Congregational church near where they lived in Stoke Newington, however, there was another elder who was involved in a brewery firm, and some of the congregation were uncomfortable because by the 1900s there a very big temperance campaign going, and children were taught about the evils of drink and something called the Band of Hope



which they were encouraged to sign, a pledge that they would not take alcohol, but when they became adults I think for quite a few of them that was quietly forgotten.

Going back to this, how you were saying about how your father got his job, and partially through a friend in the Congregational church. Was that quite common, would individuals, senior, maybe elders, senior people in the Congregational church, would they try and facilitate younger members ...?

I think so. I think it was quite acceptable and the people were only too happy to help somebody. My grandfather who many respected, because one of his boys was looking for a job and this reference would help. I don't think it was regarded as being out of order to get this assistance.

You mentioned your father's older brother, he got a job at Parr's bank, what about other members of the family, cousins, uncles, were they doing similar commercial type jobs.

I'm not sure, one of my father's cousins actually became a consul in the Far East, so he obviously entered the diplomatic service and rose quite highly, that was on my grandfather's side of the family, so they didn't all just enter banks. There was an uncle who went to Canada because things hadn't really worked out very well for him. And when he went to Canada he worked in the post office, after a variety of jobs that's where he ended up. Don't forget there were large families, there had been four girls, one of them sadly had died at the age of seven, that was so common in those days before we had antibiotics and inoculations, etc., I think it was probably diphtheria she died of. But her three sisters had education, and the eldest daughter became an art teacher, she had quite a skill with painting, water colours, another sister next to her was one of the first students at Bedford College for London University though she was about twenty nine or so before she entered the college in about 1906 or 07 and she later taught mathematics at Credolfin School and one of her pupils was Dorothy L Sayers the mystery writer. After the Great War in 1919 she joined the London Missionary Society and went out to teach mathematics at a university in China and was then interned by the Japanese after Pearl Harbour 1941 and returned, her health badly affected, in 1946 when she retired and lived with her sister in Stockwell. But that was the position regarding the girls in the family.

And these girls were the sisters of your ...?

Yes, and the youngest sister was a music teacher at Stockport High School for Girls where she went 1913 and she retired from in 1947.

So, effectively all of your father's family, brothers and sisters, all of those were educated, your grandfather spending money on their education with a view to them getting jobs, to using their education?

Yes.

Let's now talk about your father and the bank, and the work he did. First of all, up until 1918 what type of work did your father do in the bank?

Just general clerical duties. I'm not sure what his duties were before he joined the army in 1915. He was demobilised in 1919 and I imagine he went to the normal duties you would in a branch ... , office sorry, he would have had some time cashiering, he would have had some time dealing with securities, stocks and shares. He had a time in the Managers Room where he dealt with loan applications. So he had a variety of positions within that building. Although it sounds unusual now, in those days it was not uncommon to spend their entire careers in the head office, moving around the departments.

And that moving around from department to department, that was normal was it? Was that something for the initial two years or would this go on throughout their career?

Throughout their career.

Throughout their career they would move around?

Yes.

And why was that?

Well, I suppose people had different skills at different levels and some were more suited to one task than another. But it was a form of promotion.

So by being moved from one department to another, then you would have been seen as getting promoted. Would you have been promoted within your own department. Was that another possibility?

I don't know.

O.K. Talking to your father about what he did, do you think there was any major difference between what he did in the bank and what you did?

Oh yes, because by the time I joined the bank in 1951, electronic machines, NTR machines for printing statements, were coming in. Mechanisation started in the late 1920s with adding machines. But prior to that, clerks had had to write things down, so that their writing was very important, and my father's writing, as with most of his contemporaries was extremely good and legible. And they would have to be making a lot of entries in ledgers, calculating interest, that kind of thing. So, and don't forget this was long before the days of ... , well when he started type-writers had come in, but before that many clerks had had to write letters which were then copied and put into a letter book which was a permanent record because as you must be aware, carbon copies can get misfiled or misplaced, all kinds of things, whereas this letter book was the permanent record of the bank's correspondence.

So that would have been extremely important for their records. Did receive any form of formal training when he was in the bank?

Well no, he undertook the Institute of Bankers examinations, and in fact, at the outbreak of war in August, 1914, he had just past the first section of the Institute of Bankers examination and although sovereigns were being withdrawn and paper

money was coming in he went into the bank on the Tuesday after war was declared, that is the fifth of August, and the bank was closed to the public but they had a special till open and he received his five golden sovereigns from the cashier for having passed the first section of the Institute of Bankers examinations.

And everybody would have got that?

Well, not all of them would have entered for the Institute of Bankers examinations, and it wasn't a guarantee of success, but it was ..., you demonstrated to the bank your commitment to your career.

And was that seen as guaranteeing you promotion or simply helping you?

It was an indication of your commitment, it was no guarantee of promotion.

How did your father see the Institute of Bankers? Did he see it as a professional association?

Well that's what it was, yes. A lot of these were formed in the Victorian era, 1870s, 80's. They were in a way trying to keep their professions rather exclusive.

Could you explain that?

Well, they just wanted there to be certain standards for members of their profession, the banking profession, and they didn't want it that people would be able to start and open banks and not have fully qualified staff, I think that was the reason. It kind of identified you as..., belonging to the Institute of Bankers was a prestigious factor.

So it creates some kind of banking community.

Very much so.

Do you think your father looked upon himself as a professional? As a professional banker?

He looked upon himself as somebody working in a bank. If pressed, as I say, he would say if he was a bank clerk.

Right. Let's have a look now at his attitudes, what he thought about his work and so forth. The first question in this respect is what were his attitudes to work? How did he see work?

I really don't know. He tried to do his very best. He was conscientious. He was accurate and he didn't discuss at all his work at home. Don't forget banking is totally confidential.

Right. It wasn't discussed.

No.

Do you think he had the same goals as what his parents had had? Did he see his job as security?

I think security was the most important thing. Especially, after the Great War and mass unemployment came in 1921 which had its ups and downs. It got worse in the early thirties, was still there at the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. So security was absolutely paramount.

Right, and do you think that would have overridden his desire then to make money, security rather than his actual pay cheque?

He wasn't a man who had tremendous ambitions to rise right to the top. He was quite satisfied with the salary he got. He would have liked to have had more and he liked the security of the job and it was very important.

This leads on to the next question now, about promotion. Could you tell me what was his attitude towards promotion?

He never discussed that.

I'm going to ask you a question now in relation to what we talked about earlier, and that was, we were talking about the middle class mentality towards work in terms of gradual increments, you know every year you would receive an extra ten pounds, fifteen pounds, and how that differed very much from the working-class. Could you tell me again what you were saying, particularly in terms of gradual ...?

Well there was a salary scale, my father started in 1913 with a salary of sixty pounds a year because in those days it was expected that parents would support their sons for a few years and this sixty pounds a year was regarded as a kind of apprenticeship, and that's what the first few years in the bank were expected to be. The salary increases came later, but when you were eighteen, nineteen, twenty, you received a low starting salary, it rose when you were taken on as a permanent member of staff, and then there were these gradual and quite small increments, providing your work was adequate. You would have an annual report that would be studied by the personnel, providing it was adequate you would get the increase.

When would he then, you were saying that to begin with, sixty pounds a year, he is still dependent on his parents, at which point would he not be ...?

I don't know. You would have to check the salary scales of the time. When he came back from the war there was a, what they called a Cost of Living Adjustment, because prices had doubled or more then during the Great War, and although they came down in the early twenties they still remained about eighty or ninety percent above the 1914 level. And I think in 1926 the bank consolidated the Cost of Living payment into a general salary scale which then stayed until the outbreak of the Second World War.

Do you think this aspect of gradual increments. Do you think that ...

It added to security.

It added to security, but do you think it also affected, not just your father's, but a whole generation of clerk's attitude towards their life?

Yes, I would say that it probably made them quite cautious. The important thing was to keep your job.

And would you say, they were earning so much money, it's gradually rising, would there come a point where they would marry, when they felt that they were earning enough money?

Yes, my father got engaged when he was thirty, thirty one. They had longer engagements in that period, and he married when he was just thirty three, they bought the house in the suburbs, in North-West Middlesex, and the cost of the house was a thousand and fifty pounds, now his own parents, my grandparents, felt that he was burdening himself with this debt because when they had married in the 1870s you could get a reasonable house in North London for three hundred and fifty pounds, therefore they thought that this was a huge amount, and it had been very difficult for them to adjust to the higher prices.

Yes, it must have been a bit of a shock.

But in fact when he did marry, his standard of living, and they moved to this new estate in North-West Middlesex, probably he had a standard of living as high as any of his neighbours.

Why did he marry at thirty-three, obviously for personal reasons, but was that because he was earning a sufficient amount of money?

Yes, early marriage was not encouraged. In fact, the bank salary scale didn't show substantial rises until the age when the bank thought that they had sufficient to cope with a wife. Don't forget very few middle-class women worked in those days.

So, the bank would start paying more when it felt that the bank clerk should marry?

No, not should marry, but would be able to marry.

So, increases would come after marriage?

No, there was a salary scale, but in the mid and late twenties this was increased so that it was sufficient they felt to allow a bank clerk to support a wife.

I see, so salary was looked at in relation to at some point a clerk marrying or what a clerk could actually marry on. Getting married until thirty, thirty three, do you think there would be any sense there that you are deferring when you are getting married then?

I don't know. I think it was quite common for middle-class men not to marry until they were in their late twenties or early thirties.

Would that have differed in any way from the working classes.

Oh yes, definitely, I'm sure you'll find they married much earlier. As you were saying, for working-class people there would be no such thing as annual salary rises. They were paid wages in cash, and unless they were lucky and became foremen or shop-floor managers, their wages would not change year after year, so their attitude would be totally different.

What do you mean by their attitude?

Well, they would not be thinking particularly much about a pension in the future.

Right, so your clerical attitude towards work is going to be long-term?

Very much so, hence the acceptance that marriage would be deferred.

Let's now talk about his relationship with his colleagues. Did your father have friendships with ...?

Yes, well he wasn't a sporting man, so he didn't belong to the bank's sports club, but nevertheless the relationship which they had such as meeting for lunch at the staff restaurant were very important and he kept those friendships through his whole life, long after retirement.

Were those friendships limited to the workplace?

They did not, on the whole they did not socialise outside work though the clerk who had taught my father in 1913, when he married, he and his wife came to live quite near to my parents. And they would quite often, perhaps even once a week, there would be alternate visits. So that was purely because of the closeness of the two homes.

I see, that was simply because their homes were quite close. Would that have meant then that your father's work friends and friends outside of work would have been two sets.

My parent's friends were mostly through the local church.

Let's talk about sport, you mentioned that earlier. Sport, was that important in the bank?

Yes, I think you have to face the fact that those who were very good at sport, it did help their careers. For example, the clerk who had taught my father he was very good at football and cricket and I don't doubt that it helped his career.

How do you think it would have helped the career?

Because, he got known by a wider selection of people, and some of these people, the message would have got around in the staff department, and he would become known, and he would, perhaps the name would come to mind when promotion was being considered for various people.

We've talked about your father doing the bankers examination. While he was working did your father do any technical education? Did he go into any further education?

No, there was no such thing as that in the bank.

So, how would he have picked up his clerical skills?

You picked up your work by experience, you literally were told that you were going to move to another section within the building, and you were then shown what your tasks were to be, and you then had to learn them extremely rapidly to make certain you were competent.

Was this any different from when you were working? Was it a similar set-up do you think?

Largely similar, though by my time there were courses organised by the bank where people could go and learn about the different sections. They did not exist in those days.

What we were talking about earlier, the professional associations, now of course you've got the Bankers Institute...

The Institute of Bankers, founded in 1879.

Which your father belonged to?

He belonged to it whilst he was studying his exams but after the Great War he did not pursue the exams, and I don't think he renewed his subscription to the Institute of Bankers. Membership was not compulsory.

This is going now beyond the period, the twenties and thirties, trade unionism, did your father belong to a trade union?

Not as far as I know. The Bank Officers Guild was founded in 1919, that was the first kind of trade union. The bank, and the banks generally, had their own staff associations. If you were being cynical you could say they were company unions set up to stop ordinary unions from having too much influence or power.

So to pre-empt the union.

Yes, I think so.

And the Bank Officers Guild, what was that exactly.

Well, it was a union. It was set up in 1919 to protect the interest of bank employees.

A trade union.

Yes, it later became the National Union of Bank Employees, and is now part of UNIFI, err, union of financial services, I've probably left one word out of that, but it's a continuation of the National Union of Bank Employees.

And do you know if that in the nineteen twenties and thirties whether that was widespread amongst bankers?

No, it wasn't, don't forget there was widespread unemployment and many clerks would be very wary of joining that. There would be a fear that it would not help their careers. But some who had very strong convictions did join and take part, and were prepared to take that risk.

And so that would have been on a conviction basis?

Very much so.

Now a question about, in general, actually entering the bank. Did your father ever mention ..., err, in the bank you would have banking dynasties, for example yourself and your father. You would have sons of clerks who would go into clerical positions, was that quite common in there?

It appears that it was very common from this book which I was talking to you about earlier, Twenty Shillings in the Pound, written in 1948, the author who had been born about 1890 had a chapter on, 'Something in the City' it was called, and he emphasised that quite often fathers would, if possibly, see that their sons were employed in the same organisation. Not necessarily in the same building. But this seems to have been a fairly regular pattern. And the firms or companies were very glad, especially as the father, by being one of their stalwart employers, was known to be reliable and trustworthy, and it was expected that his son would turn out to be exactly the same.

Yes, that would be re-produced. And do you think that that was important. I mean did the banks expect, was that one of the main things that they were looking at, that they could actually trust the bank clerk?

Oh, absolutely imperative. Trust was everything. You signed a declaration of secrecy when you joined, and the information that you learned was never to be divulged as long as you..., even if you left the bank after a while which some clerks did. I think most of them stayed. You had to keep that information confidential.

How would the bank have been able to work out you were a trustworthy character or not?

By your behaviour and performance. I mean cashiers, especially those handling money, it would have been self-evident if there were any problems. And inspectors, don't forget, came to branches at regular intervals, about eighteen months or so. Books, cash, balances had to be agreed every night from a cashier. A very close check was taken on all financial aspects. And I mean if there was any question of any irregularity the matter was taken extremely seriously and after investigation if the person concerned was found to have been guilty, dismissal was immediate.



Right. One of the last questions I wanted to ask you about, I asked you this earlier about your father's attitude to work, you said that he never talked about that. There is a conception that clerks were bored with their work, that they never had any satisfaction from their job. What do you think about that in your father's case? Do you think he was bored with his work?

No, I don't think so at all. I think he had a great interest in detail, in accuracy, and I think he would always have been very conscientious about whatever task or whatever position he was in during his career. The only time I heard that he found it very stressful was when he had a spell in what they call the Manager's Room, where the high-flyers were, and their work was extremely demanding, having to work against deadlines, providing information at breakneck speed, and I think he probably was more comfortable in sections of the work where the pace was slightly slower.

Right, but you think then that he derived satisfaction from the ...

Very much so. When he came to retire I think that if you had asked him, he would have said that he had had a satisfactory time in his forty plus years with the bank, and the most valuable thing probably would have been the colleagues he had met in those years.

And those colleagues would have been life long ...?

Very much so, and similar people. And doing my work in the archives at the moment in transferring historical information from the staff magazines and the various constituency banks to the computer data base I've come across again and again this impression that you were dealing with men and later women of course coming in the bank of the highest integrity, I can't emphasise that enough. They were quite remarkable men and women.

Can you explain what you mean there by integrity?

Well, total honesty, trustworthy, the way they conducted themselves. People you had the highest respect for. I can't put it more simple than that.

So a value which would have been important, which they would have invested in their jobs, would have been their character, their integrity?

Very much. They had very high values. Obviously, there were some who were, shall we say, not accepted, that's not the right word, whose actions were different. But on the whole these were men of the highest calibre, integrity, who were in a way very much pillars of their community.

Right, and that integrity could be transferred from the workplace to the community?

Very much so. For example, my father had volunteered as a soldier during the First War. In the Second War, in fact in 1938 at the time of the Munich Crisis, he volunteered to be an ARP Warden, that's Air Raid Precautions Warden, and during the blitz and in a period right up to the flying bombs, V2 rockets, the end of the war, he had volunteered on a regular, rota basis to give his nights to being an ARP Warden,

patrolling the streets, looking for people who hadn't blacked out their windows adequately, and generally dealing with incidents when bombs and other missiles fell. So, he just took that, as he and others like him, just took that as a normal part of their community responsibility.

And why do you think he volunteered? Do you say he thought it was a duty?

Yes, he felt it was his duty towards his country, very much so.

Do you think the bank too would have expected its employees too to have that attitude?

Oh, I would think it would have encouraged it very much. The staff magazines were full of reports of the work that bank employees were doing for the community. And of course those who joined the services, sadly quite a few, or many were killed in the First War, and in the Second War there were also many casualties. And there would be obituary notices about these employees who had been killed, and you can tell from the content of these obituaries that they were regarded as having made the ultimate sacrifice. The bank had the highest respect for each one of them.

Do you think also, what do you think yourself was the purpose in the bank of the magazine, the sports societies?

Oh, it was a moral building exercise to encourage a feeling of belonging and a pride in the bank, definitely. And that way, it was hoped it would engender, you know, people would work better if you like.

Do you say that in a cynical sense. Was the bank thinking, well you know, we'll set up these clubs so we'll get more work out of our ...

The cynics would say so. They probably had mixed motives of doing it. But the affect was definitely to build pride in the place of work and it definitely raised the moral of the employees.

Right, and that sense of belonging do you think was important?

That was regarded as very important. Well, you've only to see in recent years in Japan, where for ten years they've had a very bad recession, and firms which had extreme company loyalty have had to lay people off, and the devastating affect it's had on those lives.

Yes, certainly.

So, I think that if you go back a hundred years that was regarded as a very thing, and you had a great sense of pride in your work and where you worked, and it helped to build some kind of security in what was basically a very insecure world.

Yes, yes, and so deriving something from that, would you say that your father's work was an important part of his identity, the person he thought who he was?

Very much so.

Very much so, that's great. O.K, thanks a lot Jim, is there anything else you would like to say, have we covered everything?

I think so.

Is there anything else you'd like to add that you think may be important?

No, I don't think so.

Thank you very much Jim

## Appendix II: Statistical Analysis of Average Salaries Presented in Chapter II

<b>Table I: The London and County Bank</b>	<b>1870</b>	<b>1880</b>	<b>1890</b>	<b>1900</b>	<b>1909</b>
<b>Size of Sample:</b>	137	164	186	219	242
<b>Average:</b>	128.175	162.805	184.086	190.708	182.377
<b>Median:</b>	110.000	145.000	160.000	170.000	160.000
<b>Standard Deviation:</b>	61.102	73.959	101.203	98.389	87.899
<b>Skew:</b>	1.780	0.990	1.937	1.603	1.048
<b>Increase in Average (%):</b>	n/a	27.018	13.071	3.597	-4.368
<b>Increase in Standard Deviation (%):</b>	n/a	21.042	36.837	-2.780	-10.662
<b>Range:</b>	60-380	60-400	50-675	70-700	70-500

<b>Table II: The Prudential Life Assurance</b>	<b>1871</b>	<b>1880</b>	<b>1894</b>
<b>Size of Sample:</b>	65	367	806
<b>Average:</b>	66.154	89.251	175.413
<b>Median:</b>	60.000	70.000	165.000
<b>Standard Deviation:</b>	38.179	60.112	115.190
<b>Skew:</b>	1.458	2.093	0.782
<b>Increase in Average (%):</b>	n/a	34.914	96.541
<b>Increase in Standard Deviation (%):</b>	n/a	57.448	91.626
<b>Range:</b>	15-225	30-525	20-630

<b>Table III: Heseltine Powell and Co</b>	<b>1874</b>	<b>1880</b>	<b>1890</b>	<b>1900</b>	<b>1905</b>
<b>Size of Sample:</b>	11	16	22	25	22
<b>Average:</b>	171.500	198.562	242.182	235.800	238.867
<b>Median:</b>	150.000	150.000	210.000	210.000	210.000
<b>Standard Deviation:</b>	127.733	154.929	149.609	143.096	154.488
<b>Skew:</b>	1.793	2.464	1.746	1.121	1.521
<b>Increase in Average (%):</b>	n/a	15.780	21.968	-2.635	1.301
<b>Increase in Standard Deviation (%):</b>	n/a	21.291	-3.434	-4.353	7.961
<b>Range:</b>	30-500	50-700	78-700	60-600	60-700

<b>Table IV: The Lambeth Water Works Company</b>	<b>1872</b>	<b>1880</b>	<b>1890</b>	<b>1900</b>
<b>Size of Sample:</b>	6	9	13	18
<b>Average:</b>	105.000	103.333	138.077	155.000
<b>Median:</b>	110.000	110.000	120.000	155.000
<b>Standard Deviation:</b>	49.598	44.441	67.254	90.440
<b>Skew:</b>	0.018	0.452	0.324	0.681
<b>Increase in Average (%):</b>	n/a	-1.588	33.623	12.256
<b>Increase in Standard Deviation (%):</b>	n/a	-10.398	51.333	34.475
<b>Range:</b>	40-175	40-190	50-250	40-360

# Average Income Per Quartile by Seniority and Ratio in Difference Between Each Group

<b>Table V</b>	1871		1880		1894	
<b>The Prudential</b>	Amount (£)	Ratio	Amount (£)	Ratio	Amount (£)	Ratio
First Quartile	136.667	1.344	295.625	1.502	439.419	1.554
Second Quartile	101.667	1.345	196.842	1.751	282.763	1.446
Third Quartile	75.600	1.947	112.448	2.065	195.485	2.761
Fourth Quartile	38.833		54.442		70.793	

<b>Table VI</b>	1870		1880		1890		1900		1909	
<b>The London &amp; County</b>	Amount (£)	Ratio	Amount (£)	Ratio	Amount (£)	Ratio	Amount (£)	Ratio	Amount (£)	Ratio
First Quartile	530.714	2.636	777.500	1.775	1067.143	2.092	847.000	2.393	601.800	1.929
Second Quartile	201.364	0.844	437.917	1.718	510.217	2.114	354.000	1.426	312.000	1.379
Third Quartile	238.354	2.066	254.911	2.257	241.383	1.890	242.083	1.852	226.232	1.875
Fourth Quartile	115.532		112.938		127.692		130.746		120.688	

